Between Material and Virtual Worlds: Fetishism and the Discourse of Capitalism

Julio Cesar Lemes De Castro

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Introduction

This paper seeks to shed light on the relationship between online and offline worlds through a theoretical articulation based on the concept of fetishism. First, it examines the concept of fetishism in anthropology, Marxism, and particularly psychoanalysis. It then shows that there is an increasing fetishization of the virtual in everyday life, while conversely the material world is fetishized in cyberspace. This bidirectional movement is associated with the increasing hybridization between online and offline worlds. Finally, a parallel is drawn between symmetrical or dual fetishism and the logic of the discourse of capitalism defined by Jacques Lacan.

Fetishism: From Anthropology to Social Criticism

The Latin adjective "*facticius*" or "*factitius,*" derived from the verb "*facere*" ("to make"), indicates something manufactured by humans and it eventually acquires the connotation of something artificial and misleading. St. Augustine, for example, in a scholium to the biblical commandment "You shall make for yourself no molten gods," mentions "*facticiorum deorum*" (1991, p. 84), which means manufactured gods. From the Latin matrix comes the word "*feitiço,*" used in the beginning of modernity by Portuguese merchants to indicate African customs, and hence the French variation "*fétiche,*" which propagates to other languages. The pioneer in the use of the word "fetishism" was Charles de Brosses (1988), whose work *Du culte des dieux fétiches,*

ou Parallèle de l'ancienne religion de l'Egypte avec la religion actuelle de Nigritie was originally published in 1760, in the context of the Enlightenment. For De Brosses, fetishism is a rudimentary stage of religion, characteristic of people incapable of abstract thought, who attribute supernatural powers to inanimate objects, plants or animals.

While this view of fetishism exerts wide influence throughout the nineteenth century, Marcel Mauss vigorously attacks it. Such a view, he writes, "does not correspond to anything definite" (1969, p. 217). It is, instead, "just an immense misunderstanding between two civilizations, African and European; it has no other foundation than blind obedience to the colonial use" (p. 245). As a result, "the concept of fetish should…definitely disappear from science" (p. 244). Although anthropology, following in the footsteps of Mauss, in fact renounces the concept of fetishism, it survives with an opposite signal. It is no longer used to disqualify the Other as primitive or savage, but to grasp, from a critical standpoint, the fetishistic component of the psychic and social structure of modernity. Psychoanalysis and Marxism, above all, are dedicated to this mission.

The first author to describe a sexual perversion as fetishism is a student of Jean-Martin Charcot, Alfred Binet, in a text published in 1887. Binet, whose legacy also includes the creation of the IQ test, compares the worship of inert objects by certain patients to that of savages, "with this fundamental difference that, in the service of our patients, religious worship is replaced by a sexual appetite" (1887/2001, p. 31). For him, "everyone is more or less fetishist in love" (p. 32), but a certain level of fetishism becomes pathological. One of the features of the phenomenon is abstraction, not in the sense of conceptual reasoning but of the maneuver that consists in abstracting a smidgen of the whole person and becoming fixated on it (p. 103). Another is exaggeration, i.e., overestimation of the secondary detail in which the subject is fixed (p. 101). A third is generalization: the fetishist is not attracted to a single object, but to a category of objects (pp. 105–106). At the origin of fetishism there is probably a random factor, speculates Binet: "An accident was produced in the history of these patients that gave perversion its characteristic form" (p. 73). And as it is an early experience, this would explain why he does not remem-

ber it (p. 77). The concept is soon welcomed by the classics of sexology at the turn of century: Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia sexualis*, Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, and Sigmund Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.

Freud takes up the theme of fetishism on several occasions after the publication of the *Three Essays* in 1905. In Freud's writings, fetishism appears as a defense mechanism against castration, involving the recourse to something that is artificial and overvalued—a fetish—in order to hide a lack. In certain cases, a little boy, upon perceiving that his mother lacks a penis, denies this perception by immediately focusing his attention on something else, such as an item of female clothing; this object will become his fetish as an adult. We are talking about a procedure whereby one object is exchanged for another: "the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and…does not want to give up" (Freud, 1927, pp. 152–153). The basis of fetishism is the *Verleugnung*, which can be translated as denial and implies the simultaneous acceptance and denial of castration. Freud clarifies the early experience that intrigued Binet: with the discovery of the absence of a penis in the mother, the child is distressed by the assumption that he could be subjected to having his penis amputated. Although one cannot simply deny what was seen, to accept it is not simple either. Weighed down by the dilemma, he adopts an ambivalent attitude:

> It is not true that, after the child has made his observation of the woman, he has preserved unaltered his belief that women have a phallus. He has retained that belief, but he has also given it up. In the conflict between the weight of the unwelcome perception and the force of his counter-wish, a compromise has been reached… (p. 154)

This is not done out of naiveté. What characterizes the fetishist is his ambivalence: he acknowledges that the lack is real, but at the same time denies it by using the fetish. The compromise, characteristic of *Verleugnung*, through which knowledge of one thing does not preclude belief in the opposite, is epitomized by the formula of Octave Mannoni, who summarizes this ambivalence: "*Je sais bien, mais quand même...*" ("I know very well,

but still...") (1969, pp. 9–33). In its primary version, it states: I know very well that women do not have a penis, but I still behave as if I don't know. Embodied in the fetish object, this compromise extends its effects into adulthood. As a substitute for the mother's penis, the fetish simultaneously denies the lack, since it fills its place, and acknowledges the lack, since it is not equal to what it replaces. Veiling and unveiling an absence, the fetish is an amphibological sign of presence and absence:

> Insofar as it is a presence, the fetish object is in fact something concrete and tangible; but insofar as it is the presence of an absence, it is, at the same time, immaterial and intangible, because it alludes continuously beyond itself to something that can never really be possessed. (Agamben, 1993, p. 33)

In his reading of Freud, Lacan associates each clinical structure to a form of negative: neurosis is characterized by *Verdrängung* (repression); psychosis, by *Verwerfung* (foreclosure); and perversion, which occupies an intermediate position between the two, by *Verleugnung*. Fetishism fits into this scheme as a kind of perversion. *Verleugnung* is not, however, solely an attribute of perversion; to a certain extent it is present across the board in childhood: "a process may set in which I should like to call a 'disavowal [*Verleugnung*]', a process which in the mental life of children seems neither uncommon nor very dangerous but which in an adult would mean the beginning of a psychosis" (Freud, 1925, p. 253). This normal *Verleugnung*, which contrasts with the perverse one, is possible as long as the ego is still a heteroclite assembly, does not have the unity that it subsequently achieves. But if, as Freud (1940[1938], p. 276) ponders in one of his last texts, the unity of ego is subject to multiple vicissitudes, perhaps a trivial use of *Verleugnung* is possible even for adults. That is, there would be an "ordinary perversion" (Lebrun, 2007). And, taking into account that the incidence of the symbolic order, of castration, is associated with historical contingencies, we might think of pathological fetishism as a symptom of a large–scale phenomenon, a crystallization, surfacing at the individual level, of something widespread in social structure—something like a social pathology character-

istic of a particular era or culture, or in the words of Freud, a "pathology of cultural communities" (1930[1929], p. 144).

Here we encounter Marx's reflection, which places commodity fetishism at the heart of capitalism. A product of work has use value in that, owing to its characteristics, it serves man; and exchange value when it is traded on the market, that is, it functions as a commodity. The exchange value of the commodity expresses the amount of average labor socially necessary for its production. Once in the market, the commodity distances itself from its producers and from the conditions under which it was produced. Its value gains autonomy and is seen as intrinsic to the commodity. Thus, a table, according to Karl Marx, "as soon as it appears as a commodity, changes to a physically metaphysical thing" (1962, p. 85). The physical aspect is its materiality, and the metaphysical, the value assigned to it. In capitalism, "a definite social relation between men takes here for them the fantastic form of a relation between things" (p. 86). Fetishism here relates to reification, the treatment of a human as an object. Stated thus, commodity fetishism can be transplanted to the formula of *Verleugnung*: we know very well that the value of a commodity depends on the social relations it embodies, but we act as if this value is a natural attribute of the commodity itself.

In the present, conditions for fetishism are particularly favorable in the wake of technical and media developments, among which the emergence of cyberculture and the hybridization between material and virtual worlds stand out. Fetishism can be thought of as the subjective logic of this hybridization.

Fetishization of the Virtual World

The fetishistic status of cyberspace catches our attention at first glance. It is not hard to see the overvaluation, in our time, of the virtual world compared to concrete reality. Also clear is the artificial nature of the virtual environment, which emerges as a parallel dimension composed entirely of bits. It is in this sense that we may speak of fetishism of technique, more generally, or fetishism of computer or Internet, in particular.

The fetishistic aspect of the virtual has a broader scope, however. Historically, technology has served humans to overcome the limitations of their condition. This is the case of technical inventions that expand our sensory or motor organs, making possible what once was the domain solely of fantasy. As Freud remarks, "these things do not only sound like a fairy tale, they are an actual fulfillment of every—or of almost every—fairy-tale wish" (1930[1929], p. 91). We have here elements, therefore, to draw a structural homology between technology and fetish, understood as a means to deal with our limitations. However, in order to function as a fetish, it is not enough for the technology to replace something that is missing; it must deny the lack. This applies to cyberspace, insofar as it operates as a simulacrum that obturates the lack of tangible reality. As a fetish, cyberspace excludes the shortcomings of the physical world from which the user accesses cyberspace.

The virtual world is plastic, editable. It can be compared to the universe of cartoons, typically a perverse scenario, where everything is possible: in a given instant, a character accidentally triggers a bomb, explodes along with it and goes to heaven; in the next scene, the same character bursts sprightly back, with body intact, as if nothing had happened. In the virtual world, time constraints are dissipated—communication takes place in real time. Geographical space is transcended—we communicate easily with people from all over the globe. We are not obliged to make do with our true identity—taking advantage of anonymity, we can pretend that we are completely different people and thus act out a fantasy, do something that we would not be able to do directly; in short, fill the gap indicated by fantasy. In addition to suppressing ontological limitations of everyday reality, cyberspace offers alternatives to deal with more specific limitations: to offset a sociability deficit, virtual friends; to offset an affective deficit, virtual love and cybersex; to offset a deficit of political participation, virtual activism, and so forth.

The offline world appears, then, as an appendix, an extension of cyberspace. The relationship between individuals assumes the form of a relationship between avatars. This is the case of the student, interviewed by Sherry Turkle, who used multiple anonymous profiles simultaneously in his virtual interactions, and for whom "real life" (which appeared under

the guise of messages from people with whom he had concrete interactions) was simply another window on the screen, and not even the best of them (1997, p. 13). The reduction of the other to his online persona gained momentum in the 1990s, with the increasing importance of mediation through cyberspace, captured for example in the 1995 film *The Net*, in which the relationships of the protagonist Angela Bennett are practically confined to the virtual world. The identity of the other tends to be defined through the profiles calculatedly built in personal pages, blogs, social networks, curriculum sites, and dating sites, or the involuntary profiles resulting from the eclectic array of references to each one synthesized by search engines.

To reduce the other to an avatar, to objectify the other, is fetishistic behavior par excellence—it takes place both in clinical fetishism, when the female body boils down, for instance, to a piece of clothing, and in commodity fetishism, when human determinations, marks of labor, disappear behind the object, and we see only the latter. But, despite its penchant to engulf the offline world, cyberspace does not fully replace it; it remains a simulacrum, a fetish. The gap is not totally denied; what happens is that we are perfectly aware of it, but do not take it into consideration. That is, we are in the sphere of *Verleugnung*. As our body inhabits the material world and is subjected to sensations and stimuli that arise from it, we do not lose the awareness of this insertion. And even though we are well aware that we are in the offline world, we behave as if we were actually in cyberspace. The fetishistic dimension of the virtual is evidenced in a passage of the 1999 film *Matrix*, when Cypher, tired of life in the "desert of the real" and nostalgic of Matrix, tells Agent Smith, while gormandizing with visible satisfaction on a steak, "I know this steak doesn't exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious." That is, he knows very well that this is an illusion, but still considers the illusion preferable to reality. The fetish is greater when the environment is more immersive and has a higher capacity to replace the offline world. This fetishistic movement, whereby one tries to dissolve the material in the virtual, is one of the facets of the hybridization that occurs between them.

Fetishization of Material Worlds

Immersion in cyberspace is generally facilitated by the latter's simulation of tangible reality, which provides familiar parameters within which we can move around. Therefore, within cyberspace, there is a constant effort to replicate aspects of the offline world, sometimes down to the smallest details. Before access to the Internet became widespread, operating systems already used metaphors such as recycle bin, files and folders. And, insofar as cyberspace competes with tangible reality for attention, to divert someone's interest from the latter in favor of the former, it seeks to absorb the very tangible reality, by doubling it, creating a virtual counterfeit of it. Simple text-based chats convey the feeling of sharing a common space similar to a face-to-face conversation, by designating their channels as rooms. Spaces in graphic sceneries, even if they have fictional overtones, become minutely depicted, are filled with furniture and objects, unfold in cityscapes, and embody the subject through avatars. E-commerce sites are based on analogies with elements of brick stores, such as shopping carts and cash registers. Mystical and religious practices find expression in online devices, such as mourning in virtual cemeteries. Virtual environments such as Second Life intend to replicate the functioning of society, with their own currency and branches of companies of the real economy. More recently, "the virtual is becoming more real; it wants to penetrate and map out our real lives and social relationships" (Lovink, 2011, p. 13). A social network like Facebook offers the users the opportunity to find childhood friends, former schoolmates and workmates, in short, everyone with whom users have lost contact, and devotes itself to absorbing their network of offline relationships and to tracking and revealing details of their tastes and interests. "It is the true digitalization of real life," in the words of Sean Parker, junior partner of Facebook, in the 2010 film *The Social Network*, which describes the creation of the site. With the motto "what are you doing?" later replaced by "what's happening?" Twitter encourages its members to narrate in real time everything that happens in their lives. Location-based games like Foursquare induce users to check in, i.e., to indicate their location whenever

they arrive somewhere that appears on a list of venues located nearby by the application. Maps complemented by images, such as Google Maps with Street View, capture the planet's landscape and the urban fabric. "Our goal is to put together a sort of digital mirror of the world," says a Google executive (Chivers, 2013, June 4). Illustrating this trend, in the 2013 film *Her*, the protagonist Theodore Twombly falls in love with an intelligent operating system with a female personality, which goes to great lengths to attempt to play the role of a real woman. Ultimately, we would fall into a paradoxical situation, which does not escape the attention of Lacan (1981, p. 48), imagined by Norbert Wiener (1989, p. 96), the creator of cybernetics:

> It is amusing as well as instructive to consider what would happen if we were to transmit the whole pattern of the human body, of the human brain with its memories and cross connections, so that a hypothetical receiving instrument could re-embody these messages in appropriate matter, capable of continuing the processes already in the body and the mind, and of maintaining the integrity needed for this continuation by a process of homeostasis.

The overvaluation of the offline world, the effort to conjure it through cyberspace, tends to result in a certain degree of artificiality. What is the purpose (apart, of course, from providing additional instances for the circulation of capital) of completely replicating the diagram of offline relationships in a network like Facebook, or of imitating everyday reality in an environment like Second Life? The artificial nature of procedures of this ilk is reminiscent of the map described by Borges, which reaches the height of precision when it completely overlaps the mapped territory, on a scale of one to one:

> In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. (1998, 325)

The same idea, in fact, had already appeared in Lewis Carroll: "We very soon got to six *yards* to the mile. Then we tried a *hundred* yards to the mile. And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of *a mile to the mile*!" (1939, p. 556, emphasis in the original). These procedures are also reminiscent of a common quirk in science fiction, which designs the future in the image and likeness of the present, proposing new technological trappings while essentially reproducing the surrounding world—one need go no further than the underground industrial world of Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis*, underpinned by the Fordist assembly line. This artificiality is even more intense when the offline world one seeks to reproduce is itself idealized. The concept of "virtual community," for example, used by Howard Rheingold (1994) and others, seems to take as a parameter a pre-modern and pre-capitalist *Gemeinschaft*, which would be reenacted based on the technique. But long before Ferdinand Tönnies enunciated them in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (*Community and Society*, 1887/2002), the idyllic aspects of *Gemeinschaft* had already been unmasked in *Faust*:

> Goethe's Gretchen tragedy gives us what must be the most devastating portrait in all literature of a *Gemeinschaft*. His portrait should etch in our minds forever the cruelty and brutality of so many of the forms of life that modernization has wiped out. (Berman, 1988, p. 60)

Overvaluation and artificiality give us evidence that we face a fetish. Indeed, if cyberspace appears as a fetish from the viewpoint of the offline world, the latter appears symmetrically as a fetish from the standpoint of cyberspace. Paradoxically, the more we escape from tangible reality through cyberspace, the further we recover it, through cyberspace itself. The more we treat the other as an avatar, the more the avatar of the other seeks to account for him. And, like any fetish, the fetish of the offline world aspires to respond to the lack—in this case, the limitation of cyberspace that restricts our engagement in it.

Nevertheless, the lack is inevitable, a void impossible to fill. However much it endeavors to achieve this task, cyberspace cannot fully reproduce the offline world. What we get

is a simulacrum of it, which lacks materiality, so we maintain our awareness of being in cyberspace. Fetishistic denial is now expressed in a strictly inverse sentence: we are entirely aware that we are in cyberspace, but we behave as if we were in the offline world. For example, when we talk with someone via a chat tool, we adopt the same conversational tone that we would use if our interlocutor were face to face with us (an aspect in which the telephone foreshadows cyberculture). Hence, the relationship between avatars assumes the form of a relationship between real people. This fetishization movement, whereby one seeks to dissolve the virtual in the material, is another facet of hybridization.

Dual Fetishism and Hybridization Between Material and Virtual Worlds

The combination of these two symmetrical fetishisms continuously reinforces the rapport between material and virtual worlds. On the horizon lies their hybridization: nowadays it is difficult to distinguish the boundaries between offline and online. The hybridization characteristic of cyberspace comprises both the movement toward the virtual and its opposite. There is no precedence of one over the other, or unidirectionality between them. The establishment of a continuous loop between virtual and material, which feed each other, characterizes this hybridization. If I am in the material world but deny it in favor of cyberspace, or vice versa—in other words, if I subordinate the material to the virtual, or vice versa—and if those transactions, albeit logically distinct, are chronologically simultaneous because they participate in the material and the virtual at the same time, then ultimately I do not actually situate myself in one or the other, but in a state of flux, of indeterminacy, which is precisely what marks this hybridization. We have two elements giving rise to a third one that is not the sum of them, but that takes their place, although the reference to the material and virtual subsists to account for the constitution and internal dynamics of hybridization. Such hybridization therefore involves an epistemological issue. For those who experience this hybridization, become familiar with its operation, adapt to it,

speaking about material or virtual worlds is no longer relevant. But anyone willing to study this hybridization can only do so by taking into account the material and the virtual that combine to form it, for it cannot be explained without analyzing the hybridizing components.

The link between the two symmetrical forms of fetishism, the intertwining of the material and the virtual dimensions, produces an effect similar to a Moebius strip. Like what happens in this topological figure, these dimensions seem to embody continuity—when we seem to move away from a point, we simply return to it. As the Moebius strip is a continuous surface that needs two sides to be built, the hybridization articulates both. And *Verleugnung* is the twist (presented in two inverted modalities, according to the point of view) that allows me to move from material to virtual and vice versa, leading to the emergence of hybridization, because with it I can pretend that I continue on the same side. This kind of bidirectional fetishism differs from traditional forms of fetishism that were studied by Freud and Marx. In clinical fetishism, the fetish object does not usually evoke the image of a penis; thus, replacing the latter with the former is not counteracted by a rapprochement of the former with the latter. In commodity fetishism, there is also a unilateral move, through which the appearance of the commodity departs from the conditions of its production.

Maybe we can draw a parallel between the symmetrical fetishism that we detect in cyberculture and a specificity of contemporary fetishism highlighted by Slavoj Žižek. The generalization of the "making of," disclosing the conditions of production of something (a movie, a commercial, political propaganda), in theory should act to nullify fetishism, but it actually reinforces it, Žižek argues. If the fetishistic operation occurs in the gap between one thing and the fetish that replaces it (the nonexistent maternal penis and the panties that replace it, the worker's labor and the goods displayed in a shop window), the "making of," by highlighting this gap, far from suppressing it, makes it even more significant (1997, pp. 101–102). Does not something similar happen in the bidirectional fetishism we glimpse in cyberculture? From a superficial viewpoint, one can assume that, if there is a movement to blend the material with the virtual and an opposite movement to

blend the virtual with the material, the two terms would tend to merge, thereby abolishing the distance between them, and consequently, any kind of fetishism. What happens, however, is exactly the opposite: as these movements are not completed (nor would it be feasible), hybridization between virtual and material does not mean eliminating the tension between the two terms, but intensifying it.

The existence of affinities between cyberspace and the offline world contributes to the fetishistic symmetrical relationships between them. The material world has an ingredient of virtuality because of the symbolic fabric that sustains it—and that sustains the virtual world as well. The immateriality of the virtual world is not absolute either, since it is resolved in the materiality of the electrical circuits in its framework. Furthermore, with regard to content, the virtual world is inclined to simulate "real life," and when it gains importance, the latter sometimes also simulates the former. However, considering that, in the ultimate analysis, the material and virtual are ontologically different and that the link between them is subject to technical limitations and to choice (we are not always connected), hybridization is not absolute.

Dual Fetishism, Hybridization, and the
Discourse of Capitalism

The use of Lacanian theory of discourse may allow us to better situate this dual fetishism within the conceptual framework of psychoanalysis.

In this theory, formulated mainly in the *Seminar XVII* (Lacan, 1991), and summarized in several works in subsequent years (Lacan, 1975a, 2001, 2006, 2011), the term "discourse" is used as a synonym of social bond. Lacan identifies four different types of discourse—the discourse of the master, the discourse of university, the discourse of hysteria and the discourse of the analyst—which correspond to the primary types of social bonds. In 1972, in a speech at the University of Milan, Lacan imagines, however, a variant of the master discourse, which in practice is equivalent to a fifth entity, the discourse of capitalism. In this discourse, the limitation to enjoyment

disappears, at a time which sees the escalation of the imperative of enjoyment attached to consumer society, with predictable deleterious effects: "This cannot go better, but this goes too fast, so that it consumes itself, it consumes itself so well that it is consumed" (1978, p. 46). Indeed, whereas in theoretical constructs of both Freud (1913[1912–13]) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1967) the limitation to enjoyment consists precisely in the hallmark of the beginning of civilization, the discourse of capitalism amounts to a deterioration of the social bond, a pseudo-social bond. Here, as Lacan states, "each individual is really a proletarian, i.e., has no discourse with which to make a social bond" (1975b, p. 187). To state that all, including the capitalists, are proletarians implies that all are dispossessed—and this widespread lack concerns the social bond.

The idea of a dual fetishism provides us with a very appropriate key to articulate cyberculture with the discourse of capitalism. Conventional fetishistic mechanisms are manifested in other discourses, while dual fetishism seems to fit only in the dynamics of the discourse of capitalism, which it would be more accurate to associate specifically with late capitalism, as the contemporary version of the master discourse. With dual fetishism, limitations of the material world are eclipsed by cyberspace and vice versa: an uninterrupted circuit is established that eludes limitations, so that everything becomes possible. And this is exactly how Lacan characterizes the discourse of capitalism.

Analyzing the terms of this discourse, the subject, in the position of agent, seems to command the master signifiers, in the position of truth. This seemingly privileged place of the subject, which is believed to stand alone, is linked to narcissism, which finds fertile ground on which to flourish in consumer society and cyberspace (Castro, 2009). If the lack of the subject is filled by object a, the subject's limitations are relativized, and there is a reification of the subject (to lose the lack is equivalent to lose humanity). The master signifiers, in turn, give meaning to knowledge in the hands of science and capital, in the position of other. From this knowledge come the gadgets (a)—which include the paraphernalia of cyberculture—in the position of production. And these objects are, after all, what define and govern the subject: it is from them, rather than from the master,

that, as Lacan states, "the producers could seek satisfaction for the exploitation they suffer" (2001, p. 415). It is worth noting that, as a rule, the object *a* does not refer to a given object, the object of desire, but to the object cause of desire—it is not, therefore, properly an object, but the lack peculiar to each one, which supports his fantasy, boosts his desire. Among the most notable singularities of the discourse of capitalism, it is "the rise to the social zenith of the object named by me small *a*" (p. 414), besides the fact that the object *a* is conjugated as a technical and commercial artifact, as what Lacan in *Seminar XVII* calls "*lathouse*": "These small objects that you will find way out there on the floor of every corner, behind every shop window, in the proliferation of these objects made to cause your desire, insofar as it is science now that governs you, think of them as lathouses" (1991, pp. 188–189). Bringing together the Greek words "*alétheia*," which Heidegger sanctioned as truth in the sense of revelation, and "*ousia*," which refers to being, Lacan uses the neologism "*lathouse*" to mock the claim made by technical and commercial knickknacks to fill the structural failure of the subject. The attempt to buffer the lack with this or that object is exactly the constitutive mechanism of fetish, i.e., *lathouse*, which literally means the unveiled truth of being, is actually the fetish, which means the artifice that conceals the lack. Decomposing these concepts and grouping the results in pairs—truth/artifice, unveil/conceal, being/lack—makes patent the fine irony of Lacan. In the discourse of capitalism we have, therefore, a reification of the subject ($), which can be related to the material world, a fetishization of the object (*a*), which can be related to the virtual world, and a two-way link between them, which can be related to the dual fetishism between material and virtual world.

The formulation of the Lacanian theory of discourse coincides with the emergence of the Internet: the first session of the *Seminar XVII* takes place four weeks after the transmission of the first message and five days after the establishment of the first permanent link in the network. And, in the oblique and baroque style that characterizes him, Lacan detects the communicative ability of new technologies, the quantum of bottled communication in *lathouses*: "I realize a bit late, since it is not long ago that I invented it, that this [*lathouse*] rhymes

with sucker [*ventouse*]. There is wind [*vent*] in it, a lot of wind, the wind of the human voice" (1991, p. 189). This is something, by the way, that Lacan had already anticipated in the 1950s: "These machines, in the modern sense of the word, which do not quite talk yet, but any day soon will" (1981, p. 21). If in the clinical fetishism a class of objects is proposed to fill the lack of an individual subject, in the fetishism of lathouse, as well as in that of commodities, an individual object is proposed to fill the lack of a class of subjects (those who share a particular taste or style). One can also associate fetishism with "these spheres with which the extension of science…encircles the Earth," which Lacan calls "alethosphere" due to their connection with the formalized truth of science (1991, p. 187). It is worth noting that the position of truth in discourse points out something that is of the order of the unconscious, which escapes the agent. In the four radical discourses, this position is reserved. The two neologisms that Lacan derives from *alétheia* (*lathouse* and alethosphere) suggest that truth is diluted when the position of truth in the discourse of capitalism is no longer protected. And the Lacanian alethosphere, woven by science, of general access and overflowing from regions before the unconscious, anticipates, in a way, the design of William Gibson's cyberspace, "a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators" (1984, p. 51).

Note, finally, that the discourse of capitalism does not act alone, but in a combination with others that can, to some extent, counterbalance its corrosive potential. In the field of cyberculture, the other discourses are also in action (Castro, 2013). Thus, the articulation of cyberculture with the discourse of capitalism, by means of the idea of dual fetishism, should be seen as an approach that contributes to the understanding of the phenomenon but does not dispense with the contribution of others.

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