



Article

The Submerged, Post-Truth “Island of Happiness” in Michel Houellebecq’s *Extension du domaine de la lutte*

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Abstract: This article proposes a Debordian reading of Michel Houellebecq’s first work *Extension du domaine de la lutte* that would thrust him into the spotlight as France’s most popular and controversial writer. Specifically, this investigation demonstrates that Debord’s theories are a useful lens from which to analyze Houellebecq’s harsh critique of late capitalism. Owing to a radical paradigm shift in the capitalist paradigm, Debord and Houellebecq posit that we live in a brave new world in which millions of individuals no longer have a frame of reference for distinguishing between commonplace reality and its simulation on a screen. On the informational battlefield where simulations of the good(s) life have proliferated themselves to the brink of replacing the real in the collective imagination of consumer citizens, they illustrate that the timeless search for happiness also seems to be even more fraught with peril in the 21st century.

Keywords: Michel Houellebecq; Guy Debord; late capitalism; hyperreality; postmodernism

1. Introduction

Building upon the theoretical framework conceived by the social theorist Guy Debord, this essay examines the problematic “island of happiness” that eludes Michel Houellebecq’s protagonists in his first novel *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. Submerged underneath a tidal wave of enticing simulacra that appear to be on the verge of effacing the real entirely, Houellebecq’s archetypal characters despondently search for any semblance of meaning and an authentic state of happiness outside of the ubiquitous code imploring them to consume at every waking moment in consumer republics.¹ Owing to the constant stream of commercial signs that accost us from all sides on a plethora of divergent screens, the controversial French author offers a dystopian vision of the postmodern subject drowning in a pervasive realm of simulation that has commodified all facets of the human condition. According to Houellebecq, the image-based pseudo-needs and desires that we incessantly consume represent a fundamental structural adaptation in the capitalist model that found a way to not only survive, but also to expand its sphere of influence like never before after “all of the basic needs of the masses have been satisfied” (Messier 2007, p. 25). In this sense, Houellebecq’s novels and poems are a “damning critique of contemporary capitalism and its propensity to make life meaningless and precarious” (Christiaens 2022, p. 330).

A recurring theme throughout the writer’s diverse body of work, which finally takes a more positive turn in his latest novel *Anéantir*² while still lamenting the nefarious effects of this paradigm shift, is “that capitalism is extending ever further into all areas of human life and particularly into relations between humans” (Lane 2020, p. 67). Unable to find a space that has not been tainted by these consumerist “simulacra [...] produced by exterior factors” through simulation, Houellebecq’s protagonists suffer from the existential nausea of being incapable of breathing life into these chimerical fantasies that do not exist anywhere in real life with the exception of a digital screen (Houellebecq quoted in Boysen 2016, p. 488). Houellebecq demonstrates that signs of happiness are a poor substitute for actualizing a genuine state of contentment and ontological fulfillment that has been rendered almost



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impossible in late capitalism. The author posits that even our very corporality itself has been compromised by omnipresent erotic fantasies that do not even bear a vague resemblance to real sexuality.

At the end of the 1960s, Debord reached the same conclusion about this disconcerting erosion of the real originating from the “shift from production-oriented capitalism to consumption-oriented capitalism” (Stratton 2020, p. 212). In his highly influential essay *La société du spectacle* comprised of 221 theses, Debord did not mince his words about “the disastrous result of the general evolution of the economy” that he will continue to decry until his suicide in 1994 (Debord 1992, *La société du spectacle*, p. 11).³ Constantly bombarded by contrived images of the good(s) life that are inextricably linked to unfettered consumption, Debord affirmed that there is no escape from the “immense accumulation of spectacles” and “[t]he images that are detached from every aspect of life” (*La société du spectacle*, p. 15, italics in original). Due to the gap between these seductive simulacra that have spellbound the masses and commonplace reality, the social theorist elucidates that this “falsification of social life” has left behind a bitter trail of unhappiness, solitude, and existential malaise (Debord 1992, *La société du spectacle*, p. 63). For Debord, there was nothing *spectacular* whatsoever about living in a world from which all meaning and any connection to anything that exists outside of the all-encompassing matrix of information had withered away. Decades before Houellebecq published *Extension du domaine de la lutte* in 1994, Debord outlined his nightmarish vision of multinational capitalism and its symbolic realms of pseudo-agency in which “all social interaction is constituted through hyper-rituals which themselves no longer refer to anything other than themselves” (Hancock and Garner 2015, p. 177). Black Hawk Hancock and Roberta Garner reiterated, “commercial realism has enveloped all social life to the extent that the commercial and the real are one and the same” (Hancock and Garner 2015, p. 177). Although we are immersed in an ocean of simulated glitz and glamour that have allegedly been placed at everyone’s fingertips, Debord maintained that the human condition is more impoverished than ever before. Specifically, both Debord and Houellebecq exposed the empty “promise of peaceful happiness” endlessly peddled to purchaser citizens by the simulators of hyperreality as a marketing ploy designed to reinforce an economic system whose wheels must never stop spinning (Houellebecq 1994, *Extension* 81).

2. Contextualization of Guy Debord’s Post-Marxist Philosophy: The Emergence of Late Capitalism and the Inception of the Post-Truth Era

Debord’s “severe indictment of contemporary capitalist culture” and the far-fetched caricatures of happiness that fuel the consumerist reverie of purchaser citizens were predicated upon a reworking of Marxist theory based on a changing landscape (Kaplan 2012, p. 458). Debord expressed a debt of gratitude to Marx for his pioneering analysis of how earlier forms of capitalism functioned, but he theorized that the postmodern subject now dwells in a universe of simulation in which it is more important to possess a stranglehold over the means of disseminating information to the populace than to control the means of production. In simple terms, Debord argued that the unending reproduction of hyperreal images connected to consumer goods and services had replaced production itself as the salient feature of the capitalist system. Debord and his fellow collaborators who formed the Situationist International (SI) group “attempt to renew the Marxian adventure under historically specific conditions” (Best and Kellner 1999, p. 131). Debord described the new integrated social and political order revolving around the incessant transmission of (dis-)information as the most repressive regime ever conceived in human history. After hypothesizing that “the spectacle is the *main production* of present society,” Debord declared “The spectacle subjugates living men to the extent that the economy has totally subjugated them” (Debord 1992, *La Société du spectacle* 22, italics in original). Without any frame of reference for distinguishing between reality and its *spectacular* representation, Debord concluded that the hostile takeover of the real was nearly complete. In the wake of this

disappearance, the quest for meaning and happiness had fallen by the wayside in the post-truth era.

3. Contextualization of Michel Houellebecq's *Extension du domaine de la lutte*

As numerous critics including Carole Sweeney, David Jack (2010), Jeremy Lane, Gai Farchi, and Amaury Dehoux have noted, Houellebecq also blames late capitalism for this increasing inability of millions of people around the globe to discern between reality and a simulated version of it. With a profoundly alienated, disconnected protagonist that recalls Sartre's Roquentin and Camus's Meursault, "Michel Houellebecq's first novel *Whatever* traces the disaggregating effects of post-Fordism on the intimate spaces of human affect. Set in the burgeoning information technology industry of the mid-1990s among a hitherto literarily neglected social group of middle managers (cadres), the novel suggests that the cultural project of post-Fordist capitalism blights all human relations and leads to an existential pauperization of everyday life" (Sweeney 2010, p. 41). In the context of the aforementioned adaptation within the capitalist paradigm and the subsequent imposition of another alternative (hyper)reality sustaining it, the narrator reveals "Under these conditions, a computer thinker will quickly become a thinker of social evolution" (Houellebecq 1994, p. 43). The narrator further clarifies that "most people vaguely admit that any relationship, in particular any human relationship, amounts to an exchange of information" (Houellebecq 1994, p. 43).

Given that the digital revolution is inextricably linked to the emergence and continual expansion of the neoliberal system, which is the meaning behind the original French title "*Extension of the Domain of the Struggle*," it is not by chance that Houellebecq's first protagonist is a computer programmer. The unnamed narrator is astutely aware of the sweeping repercussions of screen-based reality that reached unprecedented heights with the explosion of the internet. Nevertheless, it should be noted that not all of Houellebecq's philosophical positions are progressive or leftist. Whereas Debord's theories inspired many of the leaders of the May 1968 movement in France, Houellebecq rarely misses an opportunity to mock those who participated in these protests. Although many left-wing scholars have lauded Houellebecq's scathing criticisms of economic (neo)liberalism, other researchers point out that the author is extremely critical of social liberalism, especially the so-called sexual revolution. From a political standpoint, Jeremy Lane highlighted that Houellebecq could be characterized as a conservative, anti-capitalist in the mold of Charles Maurras and Auguste Comte. Even if the current political atmosphere places detractors of (neo)liberalism squarely on the left in many countries, Lane recognized that there is a longstanding tradition of "counter-revolutionary anti-capitalism" on the right (Lane 2020, p. 65). For instance, many conservatives in the United States espoused anti-capitalist tendencies before Ronald Reagan. Despite Houellebecq's "rejection of the liberalization of social and sexual mores," which will be further probed later in the essay, Debord and Houellebecq's projects coalesce in their understanding of late capitalism and the hegemonic forces undergirding it (Lane 2020, p. 63). Furthermore, both authors paint a strikingly similar portrait of the anguish experienced by the post-modern subject who is trying to navigate the murky waters of the universe of simulation in an effort to (re-)discover happiness and a sense of ontological purpose.

4. The Problematic Search for Happiness in a Hyperreal, Post-Truth Universe of Simulation

As evidenced by the hegemonic role of the Roman bread and circuses, Debord and Houellebecq realize that this representational crisis is not a novel phenomenon from a philosophical perspective. However, modern technology has greatly exacerbated the problem, resulting in a disquieting situation in which a large segment of the global population no longer has a frame of reference for pushing back against the commercial empire of signs that have taken the place of the real for all intents and purposes. For an indoctrinated purchaser citizen engulfed in a web of stray signs, she-he is trapped in a ubiquitous "prison of representation" that essentially substitutes itself for reality (Berger 2020, p. 10). Underscoring how this predicament has assumed unparalleled dimensions to the alarming

point of hollowing out our connection to anything that exists outside of the informational vectors that concretize postmodern life, Debord opined “The spectacle, understood in its totality, is both the result and the project of the existing world of production. It is not a supplement to the real world, its added decoration. It is the heart of the unrealism of real society [...] the spectacle constitutes the present *model* of socially dominant life” (Debord 1992, p. 17, italics in original). After observing that the already dire situation had deteriorated even further with the development of new technologies that had obliterated any meaningful distinction between private and public space, Debord proclaimed that what Baudrillard calls “the final stage of simulation”, or the complete erasure of reality, was upon us 21 years later in *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle* (Barron 2011, p. 394). As the social theorist bemoaned, “The integrated spectacle shows itself to be simultaneously concentrated and diffuse [...] When the spectacle was concentrated, the greater part of surrounding society escaped it, when diffuse, a small part, no part. The spectacle has spread itself to the point where it now permeates all reality” (Debord 1990, p. 9). Similar to Baudrillard, another provocative theorist with whom he shared much in common, Debord implied that post-truth metanarratives are *true* in the sense that nothing at all stands against them. Outmoded dichotomies such as truth versus fiction have lost all significance for the postmodern subject who lives in a parallel universe governed by different laws and market logic. According to Debord, “[s]uch is the extent and power of commodity fetishism by 1967 that it no longer makes sense to refer to it as an illusion. The result [...] is the complete dominance of representation—the ‘spectacle’—over what had been thought of as ‘reality’” (Hawkes 1996, p. 169).

Even if many readers would take issue with Debord’s radical claim that the real has imploded entirely, his principal idea regarding post-truth simulations is cogent. They have not only impacted how we define ourselves and relate to others in our social lives, but they have also invaded the political arena. Building upon Baudrillard’s theories and postmodern thought in general, Diane Rubenstein explained in her landmark essay *This is Not a President: Sense, Nonsense, and the American Political Imaginary* that the hyperreal started to dominate U.S. politics with the election of Ronald Reagan (Rubenstein 2008). In a recent book chapter entitled “Guy Debord, Donald Trump, and the Politics of the Spectacle” from the collection of essays *The Spectacle 2.0: Reading Debord in the Context of Digital Capitalism*, Douglas Kellner asserted that Donald Trump would harness the veritable force of the hyperreal like never before. Kellner identified Trump as the first (purely) hyperreal American president that was “empowered and enabled to run for the presidency in part because media spectacle has become a major force in US politics, helping to determine elections, government, and more broadly the ethos and nature of our culture and political sphere” (Kellner 2017, p. 3). As a “successful creator and manipulator of the political spectacle,” Trump’s unending flow of “alternative facts” (a phrase uttered by Kellyanne Conway during a press conference) created a *spectacular* universe disconnected from readily available evidence in which millions of Americans would continually “drink the nectar of simulation” (Kellner 2017, p. 3; Cline 2011). The fact that so many Americans still reside in “Trump’s imaginary realm,” even after the January 6th insurrection and attempted *coup d’état*, lends credence to Debord’s post-Marxist theory that the nexus of power now emanates from a hyperreal, post-factual (dis-)informational matrix (X). Trump’s extreme neoliberal agenda inundated the public with hyperreal images of “commodity happiness” that obfuscated the reality of historic corporate profits, a drastic increase in the cost of living, stagnating wages, and a shrinking middle class (Debord 1992, *La société du spectacle* 60). In this regard, the hyperreal structure of late capitalism was on full display throughout the duration of Trump’s first and perhaps only term. Given that Trump’s policies only added trillions of dollars to the national debt and made the top 1% even wealthier, the signs of “commodity happiness” that he promoted decrystallize under any kind of scrutiny.⁴

Houellebecq’s protagonists are also victims of the image-based, (hyper)reality that solidifies a system of exploitation that only benefits the privileged few. From 1994 to the present, the author draws a rending portrait of millions of disenfranchised people around

the globe who are living a recurring nightmare as opposed to realizing the dream linked to consumerist aspirations flickering across their screens. Illustrating that late capitalism conjures up a vision of happiness connected to the acquisition of a vast array of products that it is unable to satisfy, Houellebecq contends “In a perfectly liberal economic system, some accumulate considerable fortunes: others languish in unemployment and misery [...] Economic liberalism is the extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages of life and to all classes of society” (Houellebecq 1994, p. 100). The author explicitly reveals the “struggle” to which his title alludes in this key passage. Moreover, Houellebecq’s frontal attack on an economic paradigm that pretends to maximize prosperity, comfort, and happiness for all purchaser citizens helps us to understand numerous passages in which the writer exposes the ugly underbelly of urban ghettos in Paris and Rouen in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. The narrator describes the office in Paris where he works as “a completely devastated neighborhood” where “[w]hen one arrives by bus, it really feels like coming out of a third world war” (Houellebecq 1994, p. 18). Repulsed by the “cheerful and changing spectacle” on every screen that beckons the masses to consume their way to happiness, the narrator is disgusted by the “Bullshit. Shitty bullshit” denoting utopian paradises that are supposedly accessible to all in late capitalism (Houellebecq 1994, p. 83).

In addition to the fact that only an ever-dwindling percentage of the population has been invited to the neoliberal feast, Houellebecq devotes a considerable amount of time to satirizing the most pervasive and lucrative simulations of all representing an erotic utopia that has nothing to do with genuine sexuality. Since real erotic encounters cannot possibly measure up to the idealistic images conceived by marketers and the pornographic industry in our “libidinal economy” in which these contrived signs are an important niche in the market, the author’s protagonists live in a chronic state of sexual frustration and misery (Abecassis 2000, p. 805). All of the main characters in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* including the narrator are “loser(s) in the increasingly competitive market for sexual partners,” because of “[t]he disparity between consumer society’s unceasing arousal of desire and the individual’s opportunities for realizing these seductive images” (Lane 2020, p. 66; Boysen 2016, p. 480). Houellebecq explains that the tiny segment of the male and female population whose bodies more closely resemble the dominant masculine and feminine ideal of beauty in consumer society have plenty of opportunities to satisfy their hedonistic desires, but their sexual partners pale in comparison to the image of the ideal lover. The problem is that both men and women have been conditioned to seek happiness and pleasure in the realm of illusory signs that finds its origins outside of concrete reality. Houellebecq insists that the incessant conquests or sexual debacles of the “winners” are more like pyrrhic victories in late capitalism that has left an indelible mark on human corporality.

Evidently, the situation is far worse for the losers of this ferocious competition like Raphaël Tisserand, Catherine Lechardoy, and Brigitte Bardot in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. Although the narrator is hardly the spitting image of the ideal man exuding sexuality from every pore, Raphaël, Catherine, and Brigitte face even greater struggles in their search for happiness, companionship, and sexual gratification. The best case in point is Raphaël, who “embodies the loser’s camp in the struggle” and is “still a virgin at twenty eight” (Sweeney 2010, p. 50).⁵ The narrator presents a rather pathetic image of Raphaël as someone who epitomizes the polar opposite of the sexual archetypes sold to the masses. His physical appearance is so off-putting according to modern standards that women sometimes walk out of the room when he arrives at the bar or discotheque. Compared to men whose physical attributes are more in line with simulated sexuality in the libidinal meat market, Raphaël does not even have the chance to be chronically disappointed. In a passage that is more of a thinly veiled pretext for the author himself to philosophize about the postmodern condition than to engage in traditional prose writing, Houellebecq theorizes “In a perfectly liberal system, some have a varied and exciting erotic life, others are reduced to masturbation and loneliness” (Houellebecq 1994, p. 100). Instead of liberating men and women, the author maintains that erotic conventions stemming from the sexual liberation movement have created a vicious cycle of competition linked to manufactured desires that can never be truly satiated since

they are grounded in hyperreality. For the “winners,” the initial euphoria quickly fades after the erotic encounter reveals itself to be yet another source of discontent. Nonetheless, “sexual selection will always privilege the same people” who are at least granted the possibility of trying to live an inaccessible sexual fantasy (Julliot 2020, p. 67).

The sexual misadventures of Catherine Lechardoy and the fat shaming endured by Brigitte Bardot in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* further bolster Houellebecq’s assertion that human sexuality has been commodified by the system in late capitalism to the point of being reduced to a pure simulacrum. The narrator briefly contemplates having sex with Catherine, “an administrator in the agriculture French ministry, whose power of seduction is minimal,” after having a few drinks before throwing up in the bathroom (Favier 2008, p. 93). The narrator cannot ultimately perform his “sexual duty” because Catherine is not really attractive at all based on simulated standards of feminine beauty. Catherine is a fellow libidinal pariah who repulses the narrator even at the beginning of their sexual mishap. As the narrator confesses, “I felt no desire for Catherine Lechardoy; I had no desire to screw her” (Houellebecq 1994, p. 46). The ironically named Brigitte Bardot has even less to offer in the spectacular, libidinal economy than Catherine. Whereas the legendary actress and model Brigitte Bardot was often evoked as the benchmark for feminine sexuality for decades in the Francophone world, her fictitious counterpart in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* is an overweight young girl who is a social and erotic outcast. Owing to her shape and size, “She had no female friends, and obviously, no male friends; so she was completely alone” (Houellebecq 1994, p. 88). Before he decides against seducing this ostracized young woman with no other options, the narrator ponders, “Did she imagine male hands lingering between the folds of her obese belly” (Houellebecq 1994, p. 89). Given the distance that separates her from the skeletal image of the ideal woman in contemporary Western society, Catherine is unable to find companionship or explore her sexuality. From a post-Marxist angle, she is a victim of the flashing images of “commodity happiness” within the “integrated spectacle” that pervade social life.

5. The Ontological Commodification and Death of the Postmodern Subject

Due to their shared “conviction that (late) capitalism and the state structures that support it have ‘colonised’ not just our work life but nearly everything outside of it as well” including our most intimate desires, Debord and Houellebecq mourn the death of the postmodern subject that has been relegated to the position of an object of consumption (Willging 2020, p. 20, my insertion). Both writers posit that the traditional philosophical “opposition between the subject and the object collapses before our eyes” in the society of spectacle (Farchi 2021, p. 65). As Black Hawk Hancock and Roberta Garner elucidated,

The subject/object is obliterated in a world where there are no longer stable coherent meanings, no knowable coherent world. The notion of an “independent” reality vanishes into a world of simulations where all significance and meaning comes through the entertainment codes, norms, aesthetics, and values of media culture in which everyone now evaluates selves and others’ behaviors, ideas, identities, according to the now dominant hegemonic ideals. (pp. 174–75)

Debord hypothesized that in a *spectacular* world in which consumer citizens endlessly exchange banal, commercial simulacra that are void of any actual significance outside of the code, there is no autonomous, human subject of which to speak. If “The subject can only spring forth from society, that is to say, out of the struggle within society,” the social theorist affirms that it is no longer possible to constitute a stable sense of Self outside of the confines of hyperreality (Debord 1992, p. 46). Convinced that it had become increasingly difficult to define oneself and relate to others in a society that completely revolved around the *spectacular* feast, Debord averred, “It’s the concrete life of everyone that has been degraded in the *speculative* universe” (Debord 1992, p. 24, italics in original). Without painting too rosy a picture of earlier forms of capitalism, which were also riddled with exploitation, the social theorist is adamant in his position that the current financial system has impoverished the human condition to an unparalleled level. Declaring that the litany of commercial signs

that we consume are on the cusp of “murdering” reality and the subject along with it in the Baudrillardian sense, Debord grumbled in disgust, “the *humanism of the commodity* [...] ‘the complete denial of man’ has taken over the totality of human existence” (Debord 1992, p. 41, italics in original).

In response to those who support Georges Bataille’s notion of the “sovereign spender,” who allegedly possesses the ability to dictate market forces through the power of the purse strings, Debord pointed out that the system itself manufactures all of the *choices* that are supposed to be indicative of individuality and freedom (Bennett 2005, p. 269). Every time that a client purchases an item in a store or online, she-he is merely pledging her-his allegiance to a pre-packaged model solely conceived to generate revenue for a corporation. Debord cautioned us to not conflate “fake spectacular choices”, which serve to create “artificial realms of pseudo-agency,” with genuine subjecthood (Debord 1992, p. 107; Langman and Morris 2003). Every given “representation of different types of personality” connected to various products and accessories plays the same hegemonic role (Debord 1992, p. 56). The content of every advertisement essentially attacks the sensibilities of the client in the same way by depicting all purchaser citizens as “having equal access to the totality of consumption, and finding their happiness there in the same way” (Debord 1992, p. 56). Unfortunately, the ecstasy of the purchase quickly fades because preconceived models are quite disconnected from any kind of true individuality. Debord theorized that the “dictatorial freedom of the Market”⁶ is more like a summons to consume that must be obeyed unswervingly (Debord 1992, p. 10). If we accept his premise that the ontological commodification and death of the postmodern subject are nearly complete, owing to the extreme proliferation of prefabricated models of pseudo-agency, it becomes apparent that “all of the *selected goods* by the spectacular system are also weapons for the constant reinforcement” of the late capitalist paradigm (Debord 1992, p. 30, italics in original).

Given that “the individual is no longer separated from the market” in contemporary capitalism, Houellebecq’s protagonists are the epitome of the hollow vessels to which Debord referred (Van Wesemael 2005, p. 89). Summarizing the searing existential anguish that paralyzes many of Houellebecq’s characters, James Person stated, “Houellebecq depicts men and women who simply exist day after day in aimlessness, boredom, and ennui [...] they spend their time counting the minutes until the days of their earthly lives are utterly spent [...] They long forlornly for the possibility of an Island—a patch of solid ground to stand upon within a sea of purposelessness” (Person 2020, p. 16). Houellebecq’s solitary, tortured protagonists are drowning in an ocean of commercial simulacra corresponding to the “idea of ‘lifestyle’ choice” and “the (distorted) idea of individualism” promulgated in the realm of spectacle (Sweeney 2010, p. 45, my insertion). As Person observed, there is no firm ground that exists “outside of the allure of the commodity” accosting them from all sides (Sweeney 2010, p. 47). For this reason, Houellebecq suggests that postmodern life is nothing more than “an accumulation and an exhibition of signs [...] acquiring material goods, consuming” (Dehoux 2020, pp. 221–22). In place of any authentic sense of identity, Houellebecq implies that “in late capitalism [...] we are what we consume [...] The clothes we wear, the cars we drive, the restaurants and bars we frequent” (Willing 2020, p. 23).

From the opening lines of the novel, it is evident that the narrator’s sense of Self and identity outside of the (dis-)informational matrix have been effaced by hyperreal signs of commodity happiness. As a “failed subject of late capitalism,” who is imprisoned in an informational vortex that now encompasses the entirety of the social ecosphere, the narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* suffers from numerous bouts of debilitating existential nausea, starting with an office party where he vomits on a couch after witnessing the absurd behavior of people who have blindly internalized the operational logic of the code (Willing 2020, p. 24). Later in the text, the narrator will explicitly identify the age of information as the origin of his ontological trauma. In a passage that is reminiscent of the anguish recounted by Roquentin in Sartre’s aptly named *La Nausée*, the narrator declares, “I don’t like this world. Obviously, I don’t like it. The society in which I live disgusts me; advertising nauseates me; computers make me vomit [...] This world needs

anything but more information" (Houellebecq 1994, pp. 82–83). The existential crisis that has been brewing since the beginning of the novel eventually implodes near the end as the narrator is "[u]nable to participate in the carnival of consumption (and) he is quite literally sickened by it" (Sweeney 2010, p. 47, my insertion). The *spectacular* feast induces a "severe nervous breakdown in which he attempts to gouge out his eyes in a botched pseudo-Oedipal manner" (Sweeney 2010, p. 47). The dramatic *dénouement* leaves little room for ambivalence regarding Houellebecq's position about the disappearance of subjecthood in consumer republics. It is in this sense in which the mantra, repeated several times in the text like a *leitmotif*, "human relations are becoming progressively impossible" should be understood (Houellebecq 1994, p. 16).

Similar to Debord, Houellebecq also responds to defenders of late capitalism through his deconstruction of "fake spectacular choices" that are supposed to represent personal freedom and agency (Debord 1992, p. 107). Instead of enabling clients to express genuine individuality, Houellebecq argues that consumer citizens have been brainwashed to conform to a preexisting mold like sheep following the herd. One day as he is reflecting upon the new human condition in the era of late capitalism from his observation post, the narrator notes "Obviously, they resemble each other, they resemble each other enormously, but this resemblance cannot be called identity. (It is) as if they had chosen to materialize the antagonism that necessarily accompanies any kind of individuation by adopting slightly different outfits, types of movement, grouping formulas" (Houellebecq 1994, p. 69, my insertion). The author demonstrates that regardless of the particular pre-packaged model to which a given customer decides to adhere, the system dictates all *choices*. It does not matter whether someone identifies as a preppy, punk, goth, hipster, etc.; all of these artificial images of *personalization* are generated by the simulators of hyperreality as a form of mimetic, social control. Debord and Houellebecq's undermining of the aforementioned notion of the "sovereign spender" closely parallels Baudrillard's affirmation that "personalization consists in a daily realignment to the smallest marginal difference (SDM)" (Baudrillard 1998, pp. 90–91). If the only type of individuality within reach in the postmodern world is to bow down to a simulated version of reality and to purchase an array of products corresponding to this. vision of personal happiness and identity, Debord and Houellebecq maintain that the final, proverbial *coup de grâce* has been delivered to the human subject.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, many theorists would rightfully assert that Debord and Houellebecq's harsh critiques of multinational capitalism and the hegemonic forces that sustain it take it a step too far. Nevertheless, both writers grapple with interrelated problems that are all too real in the age of (dis-)information. Even if Debord and Houellebecq have a predilection to engage in hyperbolic discourse, the theoretical frameworks that they conceive for shedding light on the *spectacular* structure of late capitalism offer invaluable insights into the most important challenges facing global society at the dawn of a new millennium. Whether we like it or not, we live in a brave new world in which millions of individuals no longer have a frame of reference for distinguishing between commonplace reality and its simulation on a screen. Debord and Houellebecq's description of the deadened, postmodern subject rings painfully true overall in a post-truth universe scarred by the most ludicrous fake news stories and conspiracy theories imaginable. Moreover, mired deep in a cesspool of commercial simulacra from which there sometimes appears to be no escape, the "domain of the struggle" against tyrannical market forces that have commodified the social fabric like never before all across the global village has just begun. On the informational battlefield where simulations of the good(s) life have proliferated themselves to the brink of replacing the real in the collective imagination of consumer citizens, the timeless search for happiness also seems to be more fraught with peril in the 21st century. Unless we are able to find a way to resist the forceful imposition of the realm of signs, Debord and Houellebecq wonder if the last parcel of *terra firma* might soon be forever submerged underneath a thick layer of semiosis that is synonymous with the human condition.

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Notes

- ¹ This expression was first coined by the historian Lizabeth Cohen in her seminal work *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (Cohen 2003).
- ² For a more comprehensive discussion of this less pessimistic and cynical view about the possibility of discovering an actual "island of happiness" in the postmodern, post-truth world, see Tim Christiaens's article "Precarity as a mode of being-in-the-world in Michel Houellebecq's *Possibilité d'une île*".
- ³ All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
- ⁴ Given that Trump's commitment to neoliberal policies appears to be at odds with Houellebecq's political ethos in general, it is surprising that the author sometimes refers to the former president in laudatory terms in a piece that appeared in *Harper's Magazine* titled "Donald Trump is a Good President." (Houellebecq 2019). In this nuanced conversation, Houellebecq expresses his solidarity with Americans who were governed by an "appalling clown" for four years. Nonetheless, he also theorizes that Trump was a positive agent of change who did not want to police the world like his predecessors. Moreover, Houellebecq is also enamored with Trump's theoretical support of American workers by rethinking international trade agreements. For a more comprehensive explanation of Houellebecq's appreciation of Trump that transcends the pragmatic limitations of this present discussion, see "Donald Trump is a Good President".
- ⁵ Carole Sweeney further delves into this point in *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Disgust*.
- ⁶ This word is capitalized in the original.

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