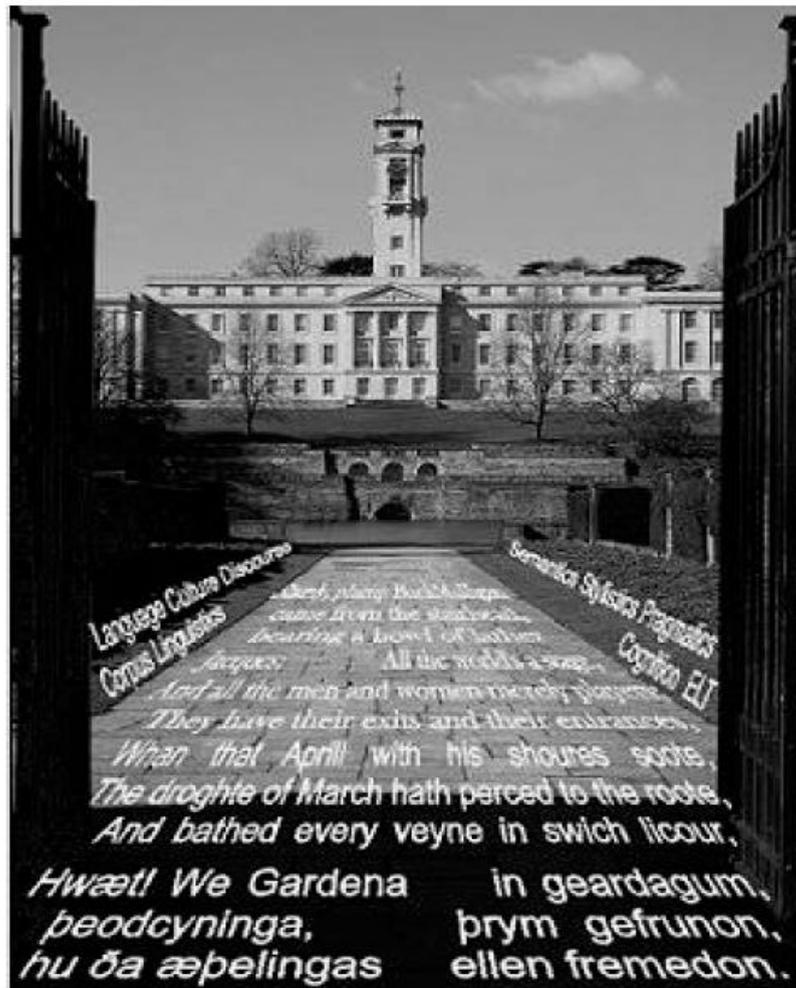


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The Post-Romantic Sublime: *Generation X* And the Intransigence of the Surplus Jouissance

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I just don't understand you young people. No workplace is ever okay enough. And you mope and complain about how uncreative your jobs are and how you're getting nowhere, and so when we finally give you a promotion you leave and go pick grapes in Queensland or some other such nonsense. (Coupland, *Generation X* 25)

This paper is dedicated to the study of the post-romantic X-subject in Douglas Coupland's novel. In the first place, the term "Generation X" needs careful clarification, for Coupland's notion of Generation X is to be differentiated from the following: it is different from the general notion of the term (which refers to *all* young people in their twenties or thirties); it is also different from the cinematic representation of *Generation X* which foregrounds a *specific* cybernetic, mutant subjectivity in the post-modern sci-fi culture; the major characteristic is that it endorses the ethics of bio-medical metamorphosis to turn the body into an infinitely, upgradable machine. The consequence is (as we can see in the commercials these days) the emergence of a "liberating" satyr-like subjectivity. Coupland's Generation X is not grotesque, but bizarre. By bizarre, I am referring to the unconventional behavior of some young people born after the mid-60s or 70s. They deliberately choose to have a highly mobile, unpredictable lifestyle. Instead of valuing their occupational mobility, they do endless temp jobs after a university or college education in order "to raise enough funds to partake in another more personally meaningful activity such as watercolor sketching in Crete or designing computer knit sweaters in Hong Kong" (40). In this light, the word "generation" exposes the paradox of semantic inclusivism—for, within the same age-group, only a selected cluster can be classified under the category of "Generation X" or *shin jin rui* (a Japanese term that refers to the "new human beings in their twenties at the office" (63)).

Coupland's X-subjects—Andy, Dag, Claire—quit office jobs and cut themselves adrift in the California desert. On the one hand, they are followers of the romantic tradition, for they favor an honest, heart-oriented Rousseauistic community. Their rationale for rejecting the urban world is not unlike Rousseau's hatred against the way people practice deception, consumption and luxury in the city. If Dag calls these people "Dickoids" (25), Coleridge would consider them to be "prostituted genius" for they have "ever-shifting perspective" to offer to the "vanity of youth". They fit his description of

tell-truths in the service of falsehood we find every where...from the elderly young [people] that discuss the love-affairs of their friends and acquaintance at the village tea-tables, to the anonymous calumniators of literary merit in reviews, and the more daring malignants, who dole out discontent, innovation and panic, in political journals. (*The Friend*, I, 49-50)

On the other hand, in contrast to their romantic ancestors like Coleridge or Thoreau, these X-subjects do not visualize any imaginary, utopian (master) discourse of transcendence or love. They opt for no spiritual enlightenment and remain lonely and disturbed in their barren desert. It is in this light that I argue that Generation X is, on the one hand, a legacy of the romantic tradition, especially with its endorsement of an unorthodox, solitary Selfhood and the pursuit for the romantic sublime. On the other hand, Generation X has departed from its ancestors' romantic spontaneity with its immersion in the capitalistic episteme, which forms the basis of the post-

romantic sublime. In fact, its existence can be defined as an angry reaction against the mathematical “surplus logic” in the middle-class paradigm. Skeptical of marketing strategies, Coupland’s young people prefer to have a hermitic life—only to find themselves eating popcorn and hamburgers. Hence, my argument is that their breakthrough lies not in a return to any pre-capitalistic, self-reliant, ascetic lifestyle, but in a fundamental abandonment of the surplus jouissance to opt for the mystical jouissance. What I am going to do next is to set up some binaries to trace the differences between the romantic and post-romantic sublime, and see how Generation X reflects the continuities and discontinuities within that tradition.

1. The Sublime-Thing and the Romantic Sublime

While there are varying ways of conceiving of the sublime object, there exists a general agreement that it is about the subject’s encounter with a “Thing” that is traumatically pleasurable, and beyond its understanding. In the romantic context, the sublime-Thing is often constructed to be in “Nature” or in “art”—in either way, an external object. The poet sees this object and is sensitized to a new world with feelings such as “awe”, “trauma”, “joy”, “self-engulfment”, or “self-annihilation”. Though the romantic Thing-in-itself remains a mystery to the mind, the sublime experience can introduce loss and grief to the poet as well as the rise of a new unifying selfhood. It is in this sense that I want to associate the romantic sublime with the Lacanain “mirror-stage jouissance”. If the process does not go well, the subject suffers from an identity crisis, or self-loss. But if everything goes well, the experience is not unlike the specular process in which the infant confronts a (traumatic) mirror, but the infant can overcome its awe to reflect on the object. As a result, it generates a new Selfhood. Given the romantic’s love of childhood and growth, one can make all kinds of connections between the poet as a child and the mirror-stage. Both indicate a period of formation through disorientation after the fear of the unknown. John Keat’s vision on the “truth” of the Grecian Urn, Wordsworth’s loss and “tranquil recollection” all reflect this process of threats, alienation, and new self-formation.

2. The Post-Romantic Sublime and the Surplus Jouissance

The major difference between the romantic and the post-romantic sublime can be summarized in a simple manner: the romantics discover the sublime after seeing a chaotic Thing (in Kantian terms, the “dynamic sublime” for it is an object that lives in “the excess on the plane of the signified” Weiskel 23). However, the post-romantic sublime turns the “Subject” into a sublime “Object” to fill out the empty place of the Thing. The “wild, chaotic, untamed, raging nature” (Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative* 48) has made an anthropocentric turn in the post-romantic era: if we think of the awe-inspiring sadistic subject in the late nineteenth century, the ruthless tycoon (plus the cybernetic hero) in the twentieth century, or according to Žižek, Hannibal Lector in Thomas Harris’s novel *The Silence of the Lambs*, this point would become clearer. Many literary narratives show that humans can induce a sense of sublime horror (e.g. Heathcliff, Frankenstein). However, if we perceive them to be completely lawless, raging, chaotic figures, the post-romantic Supreme Subject is completely “lawful”, disciplined, and methodical. It is in this sense that we can understand why Lacan and Žižek pay such attention to the problem of the sadistic subject and the ideologized Capitalist. These creatures are “law-oriented” beings who operate according to the symbolic law and the market law of exchange (i.e. they give up their primal Being in order to acquire language, knowledge, money, honor and paternal approval). A problem arises when these creatures undergo a radical identification: their “glory” and sublimity comes from their relentless *fixation* on one particular set of signifiers and take it as, in Kantian terms, the *Highest Good* (e.g.

“Eros” or “Money”). Hence Lacan has no hesitation to associate Kant’s categorical imperative with the sadistic mentality: their sublimity is also the source of their radical Evil because these subjects follow a commandment (regardless of its content) and take the commandment to be “logically receivable as universal, that it hold for all cases, even if not everyone obeys it” (Marini, *Jacques Lacan* 187). The subject must perform in raging nature to *justifiably* enact its “law”—for it realizes “how the pressure of the moral law is stronger than even the mightiest of natural forces” (Žižek, *TN* 47).

Though they seem to be unique, the sadistic torturers or tycoons are *not* individuals. With their adherence to the “law” of an “absolute” signifier, “[i]t is as an object that the...subject is obliterated” (Lacan, *Seminar IX* 50). They certainly demonstrate what Kant calls the “mathematical sublime” for it is an “excess on the plane of the signifier” (Weiskel 24). Their sublimity comes from the symbolic order and goes beyond the decrees of the symbolic. Instead of favoring any natural feelings (to ground an indelible, asymbolic individuality), the sublime “Supreme Subject” does not allow metonymic sliding to take place so as to pursue the “absolute *symbolic jouissance*”. Under such circumstances, the subject is strangely *inhuman*. Žižek comments that “[i]ts general result is clear: by being filtered through the sieve of the signifier, the body is submitted to castration...the body survives as dismembered, mortified” (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 122). In short, the post-romantic sublime “Subject” enjoys a pleasure that lies not in the indulgence of desire—for in fact these subjects “do not give way on their desire”. Instead, they will themselves to be “split”, to be “pinned” to a signifier which represent themselves for the Other. This act makes them become “frighteningly ruthless, exempted from the circle of everyday feelings and considerations, passions and fears” (Žižek, *SO* 117). The tycoon’s ruthless measures can only disrupt the homeostasis of the pleasure principle. Juliette’s promiscuity “is precisely beyond the limit at which enjoyment still gives pleasure” (*ibid*).

Coupled with the capitalistic logic, the Supreme Subject’s psychical economy embraces a “moral” categorical imperative, a regulative Idea without restraints: the subject pursues not the ordinary profit that one can have in everyday life, but the forbidden pleasure of the other. Marx calls this the “surplus value”—for capitalists skim off the top for themselves instead of paying the profit to the employees. And Lacan subsequently invented the concept of “surplus *jouissance*” to highlight how the alienated Supreme Subject happily negates its natural feeling, and turns to a symbolic pleasure that circulates “outside” of the subject in the Other. Hence the subject can maximize its capacity to earn more profit, have no remorse in possessing the fruits of the other’s labor while it denies its own right to enjoy wealth (self-negating miserliness). Is this “superego” the same as id? Boothby disagrees. The Id-oriented subject would not have endorsed this type of sterile “enjoyment”.

3. Traditionalist, Yuppie, and Generation X

It is in this way that we can understand the background of the rise of Generation X. Fascinated by and disgusted with the idea of leading a life qua “symbolic enjoyment” (Money, designer labels) in the middle-class, Coupland’s hero, Andy, identifies three types of subjects—the traditionalists, yuppies, and Generation X—in the contemporary society. Their differences mirror how capitalism moves from an industrial society to a “post-industrial society”.² In turn, post-industrialism can lead some young people to look for a world beyond materialism (Kenneth Kenniton, Paul Goodman). And this is Coupland’s notion of Generation X.

3.1 Traditionalists and the Beautiful Order

Traditionalists are die-hard middle-class citizens represented by Andy's parents and his boss Mr and Mrs MacArthur (Phil and Irene). They are the only unitary subjects in the novel for they seem to have retained the apriori ability to find, in Kantian terms, a "transcendental unity of apperception" in a chaotic society. They remain "at home" in the well-organized *imaginary order*. For example, Phil and Irene "live in a permanent 1950s" (128). They adhere to a world of stable (class) prejudices symbolized by an insistence on big cars ("I could never own any car smaller than my Cutlass Supreme" 129) and anti-Semitism (Jews will even try to "arrange a flood" to cheat the insurance company 131). To the X-subjects, this "intuitive" understanding of reality is a fantasmal reading that arises from a "pre-ideological" worldview. In spite of its innocent outlook, Žižek actually considers this to be the "last support of the ideological effect". It signifies an unreflective, fixated, "non-sensical, pre-ideological kernel of enjoyment" that refuses to be penetrated by reason or changes (SO 124). As traditionalists do not ask questions, they can remain the faithful supporters of a *preconceived* order in capitalistic and middle-class cultures. Andy's parents never ask why they want to follow the consumeristic practices; they simply "take shopping at face value" (76). They are not Christians, but they think a "Christmas without presents" is "madness" (166).

Speaking from a "normal" perspective, traditionalists demand people to subscribe to their beliefs immediately for they incarnate the very essence of normality, with a "universal voice". Hence, their speeches lack the "I think", "I believe" in ordinary people's remarks; and behind the polite questions, they confidently take any differences from their point of view as "deviance". Andy's mom asks questions with loaded assumptions ("Is that the way you're cutting your hair now, dear?" 129). In other words, traditionalists are happy conformists who take "being normal" as the ideal state of being, and subtly force people to deindividualize themselves to follow them as well. As a result, Andy believes "after ten minutes, *any* spiritual or psychic progress [he] may have made in the absence of [his] family has vanished or been invalidated" (159). And Dag knows his parents always want to "rearrange [his] life" (98). With a strong herd instinct, traditionalists can be highly manipulative, but at the same time, easy to manipulate. Give them an idea with a comfortable package and a decent outlook, they will buy it. Dag and Andy once have a game: Dag bets Andy he could have them "all singing along with him to 'It's a Heartache', a grisly, strangely out-of-date...love tune" (21). Andy thinks this notion is "too silly even to consider", so he accepts the bet. A few minutes later, he listens to "the tuneless bleatings and bellowings of the crowd, accompanied by their swaying...arms flailing arrhythmically to the song's beat" (21). Andy loses fifty dollars as a result.

In terms of aesthetic judgement, traditionalists are not sublime people. In fact, they cannot even appreciate the concept of sublimity owing to their love of beautiful order, which, in the Lacanian context, belongs strictly to the realm of the pleasure principle (whereas the sublime is beyond the pleasure principle). The function of the pleasure principle is to "lead the subject from signifier to signifier, by generating as many signifiers as are required to maintain as low as possible the tension that regulates the whole functioning of the psychic apparatus" (*Seminar VII* 119). Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that the traditionalists love shopping, commercials, television shows for the influx of signifiers can effectively hide the ontological lack of being. And the very desire to avoid seeing a crack in life shows in their refusal to confront changes, challenges and chaos. For example, Andy transforms the living room into a sea of candles, but his parents cannot feel the enthusiasm he feels. They first feel dazed and then only feel displaced. His mother goes to fetch a pot of coffee, his father deactivates the smoke detectors

for fear of triggering a false alarm. They cannot appreciate the concept of grand, sublime chaos. For traditionalists, pleasure is to remain as far as possible from the Thing so that they can maintain a sense of (false) unity.

3.2 *Yuppies and the Surplus Jouissance*

According to Lyotard, “There is something of the sublime in capitalist economy. It is not academic, it is not physiocratic, it admits of no nature. It is, in a sense, an economy regulated by an Idea—infinite wealth or power” (105). This infinite idea—constructed on the plane of the excess of the signifier—is exactly what Kant calls the mathematical sublime. In that regard, the sadistic subjects or the yuppies’ total identification with the symbolic Idea differs from their ancestors’ adherence to the imaginary Order. Yuppies want to refashion their “Self” to acquire “the real in the symbolic jouissance”. Their “moral law” aims at repressing every natural feeling to pursue the Highest Good (“Money”, “Success”), yuppies will become the inhuman “Thing” who practice the “sublime ethic of fulfilling duty for the sake of duty” (Žižek, *TN* 85).

Disciplined and relentless, they will adhere to this “fantasmatic frame of the Ideas” (90) to pursue their idea of the “*positive sublime*” (Sex, Money, Power). It is an ironic turn for the enlightenment movement for Kantian self-determining (moral) “practical reason” has led to the possibility of “Radical Evil”—in Žižek’s words, “an Evil which, as to its form, *coincides with the Good* (the free will qua will which follows universal self-positing rules can choose to be “evil” out of principle, not on account of “pathological”, empirical impulses” *TN* 45).

In this sense, Coupland’s yuppies have fully captured the first characteristic of the surplus jouissance, i.e. their Idea of the Highest Good is inhuman, their enjoyment is sterile. As surplus jouissance is a symbolic game that circulates outside the self in the big Other, the subject, by surrendering all to the potency of one absolute symbol (e.g. “Career”), can conveniently neglect its humane feelings, self-interest. In turn, the subject can paradoxically enjoy the bliss of success, “self-actualization” and (cold-blooded) self-annihilation. Coupland’s later novel, *Microserfs* fully captures the sterile notion of enjoyment in the world of yuppies. Unlike the traditionalists who at least lead an orderly, beautiful life, Coupland describes how the “Silicon Valley is so career-o-centric”, with “[s]o much career energy” (191) that “people end up living in group houses” to “fake having a life”: “work, sleep, work, sleep, work, sleep” (4). To them, the “Highest Good” is to train themselves to live in a universe that consists of “home, Microsoft, and Costco” (3). Abe, a multimillionaire, cares nothing about interior décor and sticks “tin foil” to his bedroom window to keep out the few rays of sun which penetrate through the trees. Daniel, the hero in the novel, analyses his yuppie colleagues and comes to the conclusion: “If you took all of the living things on the Microsoft Campus, separated them into piles, and analyzed the biomass, it would come out to”: “38% Kentucky bluegrass”, “19% human beings”, “.003% Bill [Gates]”, “23% other: crows, birch, insects, worms, microbes, nerd aquarium fish, decorator plants in the lobbies”... (38).

Yuppies are professional technocrats who have the knowledge and technology to control things. In turn, they are not interested in simple economic growth or use value. What they want is the surplus value, the “X-efficiency” that careful planning can give them.³ Hence, Coupland has identified the second characteristic of yuppie logic in this way: their engagement with the “practical (instrumental) reason” has ironically turned them to practice extreme unreason. Martin, Dag’s ex-boss, maximizes the use of office space with a most efficient plan of cramped workstations (what Dag calls a “Veal-fattening pen” 24). He earns big money, but cares not about the health of his staff (though they are already suffering from the “Sick Building Syndrome” 22). Martin is the typical yuppie “who always [grabs] the best piece of cake first and then [puts] a

barbed-wire fence around the rest" (26). He can buy a brand-new million-dollar home and chat with his other yuppie buddies about gut liposuction, but he goes mad when an inspector walks in to check the quality of air in his office. Martin stands for the yuppie's *imperialistic*, entrepreneurial desire for "a forbidden jouissance", i.e. to have it all, to have the best at the expense of others, to demand others to follow his Law; if not, he will *rightfully* retaliate (and that is where the "sublime terror" emerges). While it is natural for humans to love clean air, yuppies will "snap like wolverines on speed when they can't have a restaurant's window seat in the non-smoking section with cloth napkins" (25). The subject, in its pursuit of (good) Law, defines the "jouissance of the Other" and posits for himself the "jouissance of a God". Hence he becomes a "Supreme Being in maliciousness", whose "Law and jouissance" become "one and the same" (Marini 187).

Unlike the traditionalists, yuppies are sick, cynical creatures who are "homelessly at home" with the system. Yuppies are victimized by the blind forces of capitalism (a "sublime", purposeless urge to produce and consume); but at the same time, they are also the system-reinforcers as they use technology and marketing strategies to sell idols, lies and products. They sometimes hate themselves for it, though they certainly love the money, if not the game in itself. This bitterness is manifest in Martin's attitude to his career. He hates propagandistic advertising, but he needs it and uses it. In turn, he becomes an embittered yuppie who says he wants to get his customers (he calls them "little monsters") so excited about "eating a burger that they want to vomit with excitement" (24). Tobias says, "I like the mind games and the battling for money and status tokens, even though...I'm *sick* for wanting any part of it" (185). In the office, yuppies can be pathological fellows who feed a ficus tree with coffee, cocktails and cigarette butts (27). They try to forget their alienating pain by talking about "horoscopes, planning their time-shares in Santo Domingo, and slagging the rich and famous" (*ibid*). It is in this sense that they can go beyond the pleasure principle to pursue the "*negative sublime*". With their commitment to the absolute signifier, after the yuppies gain their success, they will discover the void of the symbol, and end in a self-destructing routine of bulimia, parvenu parties, drugs, broken relationships, and seasonal divorce. In short, they have a prominent bent to act out their death-drive. In *Life After God*, Coupland reflects on the doomedness of this generation:

I felt sad because I realized that once people are broken in certain ways, they can't ever be fixed, and this is something nobody ever tells you when you are young and it never fails to surprise you...as you see the people in your life break one by one. You wonder when your turn is going to be, or if it's already happened. (167)

In fact, Lacan has long pointed out how the death drive is constitutive of the Symbolic order, and the subject—murdered by the inhuman fixation to an absolute symbol—is basically a person who has suffered its first death, even though the subject's second, physical death may come years later. (In *Generation X*, Coupland has a chapter with a title called "Dead at 30 buried at 70"). The negative sublime is "a place of sublime beauty as well as terrifying monsters" for it "is the site of *das Ding*, of the real traumatic kernel in the midst of symbolic order" (*SO* 135). In short, the hard-earned "success" or "enjoyment" only leads the subject to realize the Thing is indigestible and empty. The subject's angry, self-destructing behavior is a vengeful act to get at the "surplus logic" in itself ("more sex, money, alcohol, drugs"!). The tragic facet of this "defiant" compliance is that it can only mirror the subject's entrapment. However, in the meantime, most yuppies are as keen as ever, to view all non-participants in the system as "losers". Hence Tobias

says to Claire, “if more people like you choose not to play the game, it’s easier for people like me to win” (185).

3.4 *Generation X and the mystical (feminine) jouissance*

In the eyes of yuppies, Generation X is synonymous with losers. With a university education, they choose to quit the system and parody the romantic wanderers. However, they remain homeless in their bungalows. The capitalistic world outside sickens them to death; but nature does not offer them any enlightening vision. In fact, they hate using language to retroactively contain Nature or experience, hereby creating another master narrative. “Andy”—the focal narrator—is a hermitic minimalist. His self-effacing narration denotes a mind that is very different from the romantic or yuppie ego (both endeavor to make the Self stand out). His ideal world is a “barren” zone without signs (TV, money, music, good looks) but with dazzling sensual images. The “ecstatic drops of pomegranate blood” will hang “like rubies” from “their old brown leather source, alluding to the intense...fertility inside” (10). In that regard, if modernism is centered upon the crisis of representation (which ends in a self-reflexive language), Generation X braves the *crisis of symbolization* itself and risks ending in a radical silence. It is almost akin to (a quasi-religious) anti-intellectualism for the pleasurable (dumb) reality they pursue is fundamentally extralinguistic and sensual, hence it can only present a void to the mind. In Freudian terms, the X-subject favors “thing-presentations” to “word-presentations”. It is a language that invokes the subject to go beyond signification, even though its presentation is still linguistic phenomena (“as opposed to *Das Ding*, which is entirely outside language and the unconscious⁴). With a vehement hatred against the false representation of Things in commercials, it is no wonder that they consider the city to be a prison or a labyrinth for it is surrounded by posters that re-present “food” in the form of a “marshmallow cream pie”, or “love” as “a kiss from the lovely film star Sophia Loren” with “cartoon chickens” (58). And they also come to distrust the library for it drives people to lead a (false) life with words, and misinterpret words to be the Thing. Generation X is also ferociously against yuppie conformism with their desire to own things, and, in particular, own the same thing in name of “Individuality”. *Microserfs* features this embarrassing incident: Daniel yells “*Gap check!*”, and everybody in the Microsoft office has to confess up to the number of Gap garment currently being worn. It turns out that only one person in the entire office remains a “Gap-free soul” (270). Coupland’s Generation X wants to escape from “bar-coded industrialism” and “standardized consummable units” (ibid). Hence they make a radical move.

Andy, Claire and Dag want to “empty [their brains], read books and be with people who [want] to do the same thing” (41). In the novel, Palm Springs in California is their chosen romantic sanctuary: they live in bungalows in order to stay away from the city and people. Like the romantics, they favor the “dynamic sublime” for they prefer to see the sublime Thing in its chaotic, excessive, undomesticated, non-touristic form. At fifteen, Andy spends all his lifesavings to fly to Canada to see the total eclipse of the sun. Secondly, like the romantics, they adore flowers and plants. Andy has a habit of buying 52 daffodil bulbs (unlike instrumental reason, X-logic favors impulsive contingency: he plants them by hurling 52 cards across the lawn, a bulb will be planted where a card falls). Claire’s resistance to Tobias’ yuppie-manifesto is that she wants to have tulips in her bungalow.

However, here ends the analogy between Generation X and the Romantics. First of all, Palm Springs is not Lakeland. A desert in California means there is still little chance for them to wander lonely as a cloud. Coupland ironically places a cosmetic surgery center at the back of his

subjects' bungalows, with Andy's dog being particularly interested in the liposuction fat inside the disposal bags. Added is the fact that Palm Springs is a quasi-aristocratic spot inhabited by retired people. This novel indirectly points out the fact that "avoiding the (middle-class) crowd" can be an expensive game nowadays. Unless they want to become genuine "desert rats", only well-off people can afford to live in a sparsely populated area while maintaining a certain standard of living. Palm Springs is "a small town where old people are trying to buy back their youth and a few rungs on the social ladder" (12). Its citizens are rich enough to ask the less privileged to cut the thorns from their cactuses. Thirdly, in terms of the X-subjects' profession, Andy, Dag and Claire are not poets. In a post-industrial society, manufacturing-based jobs are hard to come by, and this means that Marxists can no longer theorize a revolution with the hope of uniting laborers' productive force with their artistic creativity. After quitting their office jobs in the service industry, these X-subjects are demoted to become employees doing service-based McJobs.⁵ Andy and Dag are bartenders, Claire works in the perfumery department in a megastore. In terms of their household items, they may be more unconventional, but they still have a lot of semi-disposable Swedish furniture. They all drink Evian water, gin and tonic, and eat scientifically enhanced popcorn. The only difference lies probably in the absence of middle-class enthusiasm and a lot of self-reflexive critique while they perform the same behavior. Claire feels she is "inserting fuel rods into a core" when she puts the popcorn inside the microwave oven (138).

In short, whether they like it or not, Generation X is brought up in a capitalistic society, and its perceptions are mediated through the consumeristic culture. In the beginning of the novel, their first thought about the sun plainly tells us that their minds have suffered from media-intoxication. Sunrise is like "a line of Vegas showgirls bursting on stage" (4). Coupland's characters may despise the way in which capitalists profit themselves by mass-producing things, but, in the midst of their skeptical distrust, the capitalistic "technologies of self" (to use Foucault's words) have engineered an interesting impasse: under the "care" of capitalism, the subject feels suffocated for it reduces decision-making to a *false* choice, a false freedom that disguises itself by diversity. The subject has to shop all the same, but it can have "its own choice" among designated lines on the shelves, it can even enjoy a bit of democratic self-representation with the arrival of a customer careline. On the other hand, even though the commodifying culture may be absent, the X-subjects' episteme is so well-defined and delimited by their preconceptions that they can only make a *false* departure from the system. Coupland's X-subjects reject the world at large but still ask the question "Why am I poor?" (120). This double-hearted identification can only make them cynical. Hence after making his customers sing "It's a heartache" and winning fifty dollars on a bet, Dag literally eats up the dollar note and says, "Hey, Andy, you are what you eat" (21). It is a rebellious gesture to foreground how he mimics—and spurns—the world's belief: "I love money".

In that regard, Generation X is not staging a revolution to stamp out capitalism, but to stamp out a particular mode of *jouissance* within the capitalistic mentality, i.e. the dehumanizing surplus *jouissance*. After declaring to themselves that "shopping is not creating" (45), they try to re-create life by telling story after story. They employ the "language of transcendence" to relocate an identity away from and out of their immanent placing, thereby creating a context that enables a short-lived ecstatic illumination. This certainly manifests the influence of romanticism, like the way poets use poetry to regenerate the broken, alienated subjectivity. However, given the new people's distrust of the romantic discourse and their McJobs, their imagination fails to liberate them to remake the self whole again. Their stories are useless, non-therapeutic, non life-changing. They use it to fill up the void in their Being, only to reveal the hole-ness, the compartmentalized

dimension in their lives. These subjects talk about “sublime love”, but it fails them—this love is either impractical, or downright suicidal for a late-twentieth (and twenty-first) century materialistic society. For example, Claire tells the story of an astronaut who goes to a place called Texlahorma—a place that Claire, Andy and Dag invent to ridicule middle-class decency (Texlahorma citizens love shopping, shoplifting, and shooting each other at Thanksgiving parties. All “adults keep large quantities of cheaply sewn scarlet sex garments in their chest of drawers” 45). Owing to space poisoning, the astronaut Buck looks like the monster Frankenstein and can only remain awake for half an hour per day. To return to the beautiful Earth, he needs the love waves of a woman to restart the spaceship. A problem occurs when there is only enough air for one person in the ship. He lives in the basement of a family, and the three girls one by one fall in love with him. He asks them to help him. Two of them—following the idea of rational choice (in which rational actors strategically plan their behavior by balancing self-interested action and common interests)—not only refuse to help him, but refuse to see him anymore. Finally, Serena is his true love, he tells her the truth that she will die if she wants to save him. Serena simply says, “I understand” (52). Her reward is that she leaves that loveless, calculating but well-off place called Texlahorma, she sees her lover’s face changing into the face of a handsome young man, and she has a vision of Earth being a “glistening blue marble against the black heavens that the stars had stained like spilled milk” (52). This story is obviously a sci-fi fairy tale after the fashion of the Frog Prince and the Sleeping Beauty—its only difference lies in the unhappy ending (which can only reveal what Schilling says, the sublime is always related to “misfortune”). Trapped between the desire for a transcending, sublime love and duty to the life-principle, the X-subjects cannot feel a sense of unity-within-disunity, or summon any aesthetically synthetic judgement (thus, they stand in opposition to the Romantic writers discussed by Abrams, whose writing of a “crisis autobiography” can help them “resolve a spiritual crisis”, regenerate “self-coherence”, enacts the process of “conversion and redemption” 96). In the end, such imaginary narratives can only heighten the split between longing and entrapment. It also foregrounds the failure of the Freudian ideal of channelling desire through sublimation. *The sublime cannot be sublimated*. If sublimation brings the subject to reconcile with (sordid) reality, the X-subject prefers to escape to the ecstatic temporality created by “little cool moments” (10).

Generation X shows how his X-subjects dislike the broken world, and respond to it by devoting themselves to the pursuit of “flight narratives”. Through this act, they hope to “reaffirm” the positivity of their future. For example, Dag flees to the persona of “Otis” to kill his nuclear phobia. Eventually, Dag/Otis discovers that the “atomic bomb mushroom clouds really are much smaller than we make them out to be in our minds”, so there is “a silencing of the small whispering nuclear voices” (79). Claire creates the story of Linda, a well-off girl who has everything but follows the advice of a sect of monks and nuns who have attained “a state of saintliness—ecstasy—release” (143). She shuts herself up for meditation for seven years. At the end, she dies for she has overdone it, but it turns out to be a flight to freedom. “Linda vacated her old vessel, then flitted heavenward, where it went to sit—like a small yellow bird that can sing all songs—on the right hand of her god” (148). Heidegger has long problematized this tendency to repress the present life with a silencing of voices or the prospect of a timeless eternity. The subject can ground itself in a world of pseudo-mastery through technical/financial control or metaphysical dreams, however, it fails to change the homeless state of its *present* existence. To overcome the terrors of homelessness and ungroundedness, Heidegger proposes that humans must return to a provisional ethics, a way in which, to use Joanna Hudge’s words, “to feel at home is to recognize that being human is being in process, on the way to, but never completely

acquiring, an understanding of being: of self, of context, and of the forces within which one finds oneself placed” (81). In other words, if one rejects earthy capitalism because it dogmatically defines the self and its needs, one should also reject those alternate-world discourses (e.g. the basement culture, or desert transcendence) that autocratically transport the subject to an exclusive coterie that negates the existing world. For the cure of homelessness lies in turning the world from mere living to a full dwelling, and it requires an affirmation of a relation to being, to others and to things.

It is in this sense that we can see the X-subject’s leaving the desert as a positive move. A sense of the Big Other—the Law—returns after Dag has committed a crime and the arrival of the police symbolizes the subject’s inability to escape from worldly interference and the paternal gaze. Eventually, these X-subjects make a compromise: they are to become entrepreneurs. They will open a hotel, but it is going to incorporate the Real hole in the symbolic order. It aims at being a chaos which defies all corporate logic or management strategies. Dag visualizes this hotel as not for business, but for “friends and eccentrics” (134). They will have a bar where “everyone staples business cards and money to the walls and ceiling”, and their activity will be “drinking rum drinks, and telling stories”. “People who [tell] good stories [can] stay for free”. To use the bathroom, one must write a joke on the wall (*ibid*). The defiance and parodying of the enterprising spirit can only mean that they are determined to eliminate the surplus jouissance while refusing to shut out the world. It is a hotel, a dwelling-place that connects business and fun, friends and strangers. It is in this light that we can perceive the Heideggerian saying that all true dwellings of human beings as the promixity of divinity: “The habitation of human beings is the opening for the coming near of God (of the unknown)” (Heidegger, *Wegmarken* 353, J100).

On the way to joining his friends, Coupland does give his hero, Andy, a sense of coming near to God, a foretaste of the divine experience. It opens up a mystical but fulfilling hole in the core of the subject’s existence. In Lacanian terms, the feminine jouissance is 1) a pure sensum experience; 2) it is mystical and desubjectizing for it leaves the phallic realm to create an unlocalizable and ineffable pleasure. As this enjoyment is unassimilable to the signifier, the subject feels its “singular”, “ineffable, stupid existence” (*Écrits* 194). Lacan uses Bernini’s sculptural portrayal of St Teresa’s heart being mystically pierced by an angel’s sword to illustrate this concept. The process is mystical for it happens without the subject’s taking any action. The result is a wound that manifests a new being-in-time, and a new being-with-others (flames of pain and love for God and people), a new being towards the death of the old self.

The end of the novel gives us an idea about this mystical-sensual enjoyment. Andy accepts the proposal that he should go to Mexico. He is stopped by a wonderful sight on the road—the sublime presence of a big “thermonuclear cloud”—which can be Coupland’s atheistic symbol of an “angry” god (204). All cars stop and Andy is surrounded by a school bus full of retarded children. What comes next is a big white bird that has determined to hover around them. It chooses to scratch Andy, leaving him with a big, mystical wound. In a very subconscious way, Coupland has actually enacted the Teresian scene of having Andy wounded by a heaven-sent creature. All voices stop, Andy falls “to his knees”. The “moment’s beauty” makes him “essentially [forget that he] had been cut”, and then he notices blood due to this “talon cut” (207). Andy is wounded by the bird—which opens up the pain of being, however, he is healed by the “faith-healing gesture” of the retarded children. With the children’s “family-like”, “adoring”, “uncritical embrace”, “optimistic and healing staccato caress”, Andy feels “being winded—crushed—pinched and trampled” (207). The wound opens up a new horizon of existence for Andy, and he is lifted from a world of deadened sensations (in the middle of Mexican traffic) to a world of love, pain, voices, silence, with blood, healing and crushedness. In Coupland’s version,

the flame of love comes not from any supernatural creature, but from the retarded children. They have given Andy “pain” owing to this “crush of love”. In the realm of feminine jouissance, language has no place. Andy is enlightened, strengthened, overthrown, excenterized and humbled by a group of young people who cannot even speak properly. All they can say is “urrd”, “ooh” and “aah” (207). However, this “warm assault of embraces”, performed by people who clearly cannot attain (enlightenment) reason, throws the subject into an ecstatic paradox of fullness and void.

In the eyes of the world, the X-subject has long become the incomprehensible, chaotic Thing even though it may not have this wound.⁶ Coupland merely heightens this facet by ending his story with his hero carrying a Thing-like cut. It is going to be a hole that makes him whole, a joyful “truth around a fundamental lack” (Marini 215). It is a return to the romantic “moment” without any Blakean dialectical tension, Wordsworthian synthesis, or Coleridge’s terror-filled notion of nostalgic loss (as in his visionary poem on the Albatross). In an unawared moment, the subject is caught in a world of discontinuity, joy, fullness and sensuality. The intransigent feminine jouissance leaves a deep mark on the body instead of the mind for its epistemological void and positive substance: its most fulfilling moment, it foregrounds the “very nonfulfillment, nonknowledge of desire” (Marini 201), and in the most loving moment, it sends the subject to the unknowing abyss of speechlessness and pain.

Endnotes

¹ Coupland does extend his notion of the X-generation to include three additional subgroups: the squires, the yuppie wannabes, and the black holes. The squires are the uninteresting but productive, hardworking people that “exist almost exclusively in couples and are recognizable by their frantic attempts to recreate a semblance of Eisenhower-era plenitude in their daily lives in the face of exorbitant housing prices and two-job lifestyles” (156). The yuppie wannabes are the “unenlightened” subgroup that believes in “the myth of a yuppie lifestyle being both satisfying and viable. Tend to be highly in debt, involved in some form of substance abuse” (104). Black Holes refer to a sect of X-people with a distinctive fashion sense: their wardrobes consist of almost entirely black clothing. Given the fact that these are subgroups and are not at all featured in the novel, this paper will focus mainly on the dominant hip behavior in the X-generation.

² A term coined by Daniel Bell as he believes the “axial principle” of post-industrial society is the “centrality of theoretical knowledge in economic innovation and policy” (14).

³ X-efficiency refers to an optimal economy that can be efficient in the production of some goods without ever reducing the production of other goods—it necessarily requires efficiency in investment in technical progress and careful planning.

⁴ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (NY: Routledge, 1995) 205.

⁵ According to Coupland, the McJob is “a low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future job in the service sector” (6).

⁶ Coupland’s X-subjects are to be differentiated from adolescent rebelliousness—whose oedipal anxiety drives them to kill the father, but eventually they want to establish their own Law in conformity with the paternal logic. They are also to be differentiated from yuffies (young urban failures) who, out of anger for their ill-success, reject the social system. Yuffies may complain bitterly about the masters, but eventually, their ultimate desire is to become the masters, to reinforce the logic of surplus profit. The X-subjects are not romantics who subscribe to the transcendental unifying discourse of unity and universal love. They are also different from the Beat generation which loves new gurus or new masters in the spiritual realm.

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