

Relational Value under the Symbolic Crisis

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Abstract

Phenomenon. Under consumer capital, desire was long produced through the signifier, building lack in symbolic form and driving the movement of desire. As the reproduction of signifiers is cheapened, creation and labor are cheapened with it, and the older work of producing lack through the signifier becomes difficult. Value moves toward what signifiers cannot reproduce, which is relation.

Diagnosis. Relation lies near the constitutive lack around which desire turns, and capital captures relational value through the same structure of desire it once worked through the signifier, rerouting desire to a substitute object and drawing off value at each rerouting.

Claims. (1) Relation is the residual scarce value in an economy of cheapened signifiers, and a relational form of value and practice, here called relational divinity, answers the symbolic limit. (2) The capture of relational value follows a formal chain that strips a relational property, reifies it, and binds it to a commodity, driven by the necessary failure of the object of desire. (3) The justice of a relational circuit is decided at its origin, its field, and within its circulation, and the reality of the relation settles none of them. (4) The turn of capital to relation is real and advanced and constitutively exploitative at once, its limit a weakness of the capital form itself. (5) Whether a good cycle can be sustained turns on ownership, on whom the surplus and the field belong to, a question the paper poses and leaves with the reader.

Cases. Three specimens are read against a criterion of generative justice, each failing at a different point. The lifestyle claim is unjust at the origin, manufacturing a lack and gating relation by purchase. The platform is unjust at the field, monopolizing the ground on which relation becomes possible. The AKB48 model is the dialectical case, just at its origin yet captured within its circulation, an advance and a limit together.

Contribution. The paper offers a Lacanian reading of relational value, joining an account of its capture to a criterion for the good cycle, and makes explicit the place of ownership. It advances no proposal, and leaves to the reader the recognition of where, in a given case, the relation stands.

Keywords: relational value; the political economy of desire; the commodification of relation; generative justice; relational divinity; Lacan.

AI usage statement: The ideas, claims, and theoretical framework of this paper originate with the author. AI tools were used as an aid in drafting and revision. Every sentence has been checked by the author line by line, and the origin of each idea verified, so that the author takes full responsibility for the content.

1 INTRODUCTION

The present moment is marked by a crisis in the symbolic order. The signifiers by which meaning and worth were secured have lost the credibility and the scarcity on which their function rested, and the symbolic order they composed no longer holds as it did. This crisis has no single cause. It issues from a convergence of material conditions, the general cheapening of the production of signs, the devaluation of labor and of creation, the saturation of mass representation, and the unfolding of capital's own logic, among others. Artificial intelligence belongs to this convergence as one factor among several, and its role is to bring fully into view the defect of a process already long underway rather than to originate it. The crisis has been developed elsewhere by the present author as a crisis of symbol and subject in modernity [6], and its phenomenology, the inflation of meaning and the hollowing of the subject, is treated below. What concerns the present paper is one expression of this crisis at the level of political economy, legible in two developments that belong to the present moment and appear to contradict each other.

On one side, the older engine of consumer capital shows a fatigue. The production of desire through brand, image, and status, the whole machinery that made a person want a thing by making the thing a mark of identity, no longer works as readily as it did. The reason is that the signifiers on which it depended have become cheap, and as their generation is cheapened, creation and labor are cheapened with them. The older labor of the system, the building of lack in symbolic form and the driving of desire through it, becomes difficult to carry out when the mark it relied on can be had by anyone. On the other side, capital opens new and vigorous frontiers of value in the very language of connection, community, and relation. Enterprises that sell nearness, belonging, and the shared bond flourish precisely where the sale of the unreachable image has grown difficult. These two developments are not opposed. They are one process, the political-economic face of the symbolic crisis. The difficulty of one circuit and the opening of the other are the same event seen from two sides.

The event resists the two ready explanations. A purely ideological critique dismisses the turn to relation as a false appearance, a marketing costume draped over ordinary accumulation. This underestimates it, because the relations in question are frequently real, generative, and felt as such by those who enter them. A purely economic account treats the turn as an ordinary innovation, capital discovering an unserved demand. This underestimates it in the other direction, because the turn carries an exploitation built into its form. The turn exceeds both mere illusion and mere innovation, and to see what it is requires a third path.

The question of this paper is therefore threefold. Why does capital turn to relation. How does it capture relational value once it has turned. And by what standard can one relational circuit be called good and another exploitative. The first question is answered by the cheapening of the signifier and the migration of value toward what the signifier cannot reproduce. The second is answered through the psychoanalytic account of desire, since relation lies close to the structure of desire and is captured through it, beyond what supply and demand alone can explain. The third is answered by a criterion of generative justice, which distinguishes a cycle that generates internal, non-extracted surplus from a cycle that extracts. The stakes exceed media and marketing. If relation is the residual value of a symbolic economy whose signifiers have

Domain	Expression of the crisis
Technical	Digitization, generative models, and recommendation algorithms shorten the distance between person and sign, so that experience comes to occur between a person and a system of signs in place of between persons.
Economic	Knowledge is copied and creation is automated, the value of labor grows hard to see, and platforms extract the relational value that arises between persons.
Social	Identity fragments, and trust comes to reside in the platform in place of the person.
Philosophical	From subject, reason, and freedom to language, power, and deconstruction, and now, within the proliferation of signs, the very outline of the subject wavers.

Table 1: The crisis of the sign across four domains.

grown cheap, then the terms on which relation is owned, monetized, and either sustained or captured become a central question, and this paper is an attempt to state that question precisely.

2 THE SYMBOLIC PRODUCTION OF DESIRE

The circuit that capital perfected runs through the signifier, and its logic is best stated in the terms Lacan gives for desire [11]. Desire has no true object. Its cause is a constitutive lack, the empty place that opens when the subject enters language and loses a supposed original completeness. Desire is the movement that circles this place, and it circles a place, not a thing. To face the empty place directly is anxiety, and so desire cannot run while facing it. Desire requires an object to support itself, and this support is the *objet petit a*, the object that veils the empty place and looks like the very thing one lacks [12]. The fantasy, written $\$ \diamond a$, is the structure that binds the subject to this object and lets desire run in a bearable way [15]. Fantasy is not a lie the subject could simply drop. It is the protective screen by which the unbearable empty place is made livable.

Capital did not invent this structure. It industrialized one part of it. It learned to manufacture and supply the *objet a* in the form of the signifier. The brand, the logo, the mark of status, the image of the life one might have, are objects that veil the empty place and promise, falsely, to fill it [1]. Advertising is the pre-fabrication of fantasy, offered ready-made so that the subject may claim one from the shelf in place of constructing its own [3]. The signifier served this function well for a specific reason. It was scarce. A signifier held its value because it could not be had cheaply, because the mark of status was withheld from most, because the image required money or access. Scarcity is what let the signifier stand as a credible *objet a*, a plausible veil over the lack. The whole circuit of symbolic desire rested on the scarcity of the signifier.

3 THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE SYMBOLIC CRISIS

That scarcity has collapsed. When signifiers can be generated without limit, instantly and at negligible cost, the signifier depreciates. An image that any system can produce in unlimited

quantity can no longer function as a scarce mark. The *objet a* in signifying form loses its credibility as a veil, because a veil that anyone can weave conceals nothing. This is the crisis of the symbolic, and it is felt before it is theorized [5]. Its phenomenology is legible in a sequence of connected symptoms, gathered across the domains above.

Meaning inflates, so that signs proliferate while each sign commands less, in the manner of a currency printed without bound. The subject reports a hollowing, a sense that the marks it once organized itself around have gone weightless, that identity assembled from signifiers no longer holds. In the cultural field one sees the receding of the very economies that were built most purely on the signifier, the saturation and fatigue of image-based subcultures, a drift away from the manufacture of ever more content and back toward something the content cannot supply.

A further symptom lies deeper than the weightlessness of the mark, in the estrangement of the subject from its own experience. As encounter is increasingly mediated by systems of signs, the subject comes to meet others, and itself, through a technical layer, so that experience passes between a person and a system rather than between persons. The self that can form only within lived relation is held one remove from the material of its own formation, and this is estrangement in a precise sense, the interposition of a sign-system between the subject and the relation in which it would otherwise come to be.

From this follows the erosion of trust and the collapse of intersubjectivity. Where encounter is mediated and the reality of the other cannot be confirmed, the relation of mutual presence, the meeting of two subjects, degrades into a relation to the other as an object, a movement from the I and Thou to the I and It [2]. Trust, which once rested on the person, migrates to the platform that stands between persons, and the signifier that once secured trust, having lost its scarcity, secures it no longer. This erosion is less a separate cause than the convergence of the symptoms already named, the mediation of encounter, the collapse of the sign's credit, and the proliferation that makes the true and the synthetic hard to tell apart.

Beneath these runs the deepest movement of the crisis, the return of the Real. The symbolic order held the Real at bay by veiling the empty place with a credible mark. When the mark loses its credibility, the veil thins, and what the signifier cannot symbolize presses back into view, as anxiety, as the felt insufficiency of every available sign, as the pressure of what will not be reduced to a symbol. The common thread of all these symptoms is that the signifier no longer produces desire as it did. The circuit that ran on the scarcity of the mark falters when the mark becomes free. This is not a moral failing of the culture and not a mere fashion. It is a structural difficulty in a specific engine of value, the growing difficulty of building lack through a sign that anyone can now generate. It forces the question of where value can go, and it already indicates the direction, since what returns with the Real is precisely the unsymbolizable, and relation between persons is the unsymbolizable in its positive form.

4 DIAGNOSIS: THE MIGRATION OF VALUE TOWARD RELATION

DIAGNOSIS The turn of capital to relation is a forced migration. It answers a necessity, and it is more than a costume. When the reproduction of signifiers has cheapened the signifier, value seeks the one anchor that reproduction cannot dissolve, which is relation. This migration uncovers a value the symbolic order had obscured, the good and not fully signifiable generative potential of the relational subject, the subject understood as the ensemble of its social relations, to bring forth in value and in practice what no participant could bring forth alone. The next section names and defines it as relational divinity.

Value, pressed from an anchor that has grown cheap, migrates toward whatever cannot be cheaply reproduced. That is relation. A system can generate the signifier of a bond, a face, a persona, a scripted history of companionship, but it cannot generate the actual, jointly lived, unrepeatable history of a bond between two persons. That history is incommensurable, unforgeable, and non-possessable, and it is unforgeable for a precise reason. What can be copied is the outward form of the bond, its symbolic surface. What cannot be copied is the coherence of the real relation from which the surface issues. To forge the surface while the real coherence is absent is a decoherence, in which the sign of the bond is preserved and its substance drawn off [10]. Because relation resists reproduction at exactly the point where the signifier has become reproducible, relation is the surviving scarce value in the moment of symbolic collapse.

This yields the diagnosis and, with it, the seed of a positive claim. The diagnosis is that capital's turn to relation is a forced migration, value seeking the one anchor that the reproduction of signifiers has left intact, a migration driven by necessity and more than a mere costume. The positive claim is that this migration uncovers a form of value that the symbolic order had obscured, and it is to this form of value that the next section gives a name and a definition.

5 RELATIONAL DIVINITY, AND WHY THE ERA MAY TURN

The value uncovered by the migration is not a new invention. It is a form of value that every deep relation has always generated and that the symbolic order, by anchoring worth in the scarce sign, had kept from view. What the crisis of the signifier does is strip away the veil and leave this form of value exposed as the one that remains. It can be defined without recourse to mystery, on a premise about the subject. The human subject is the ensemble of its social relations rather than an isolated individual [13], and what is most its own is generated in those relations rather than held prior to them.

Definition: relational divinity By **relational divinity** is meant the good, not fully significant generative potential of the relational subject, the subject understood as the ensemble of its social relations, to bring forth in value and in practice what no participant could bring forth alone. It is the potency of a relational being to generate the non-signifiable value borne on shared experience and memory, to sustain a good circulation of value among its participants, and to bring into being, under a relational system, value that no individual could produce in isolation. It is at once a form of value and a form of practice, the value a relation generates and the practice by which that value is generated and sustained. It is divine in a functional and not a mystical sense, in that it names the potential at which a good exceeding the individual comes into being. It is generated only in the coupling of persons, it binds and elevates them, and it is possessed by none of them.

The term divinity is used advisedly and can be justified without metaphysics. Across history, the divine has named whatever exceeds the individual and confers a value the individual cannot confer upon itself. What has changed is the site to which that excess has been attributed, and this displacement can be read as a materialist sequence rather than a speculative one, since each site rests on a definite condition that later conditions dissolve.

Under the first condition, the excess was attributed to a transcendent source, a sacred located beyond the human and approached through distance and hierarchy. Its material basis lay in a world where the conditions of life were largely unmastered and appeared as given from without, and its classical account is the sociology of the sacred and the analysis of the numinous, in which the sacred is set apart from the profane and organizes the collective.¹ This is a divinity of transcendence.

Under the second condition, following the disenchantment of the world, the excess was attributed to the sign, to reason and its representations, which appeared to carry an unlimited power to order and to promise. Its material basis lay in the rise of the market and of mass representation, where the signifier, held scarce, could stand for worth and organize desire. Its classical account runs from the disenchantment thesis through the theory of the spectacle and of simulation, in which the sign detaches from its referent and circulates as if self-grounding.² This is a divinity of the sign, a symbolic divinity.

The present turn is legible as the exposure of the defect internal to the second condition. When signifiers can be reproduced without limit, the sign can no longer hold the excess, for a sign that anyone can generate confers nothing. The crisis of the symbolic, developed elsewhere by the present author as a crisis of symbol and subject in modernity, is precisely the moment at which the symbolic site of the excess is voided [6]. What then remains to carry the value that exceeds the individual is the one thing the reproduction of signifiers cannot cheapen, which is relation. The displacement toward relational divinity is on this reading the residue of a material process rather than a metaphysical prophecy, the value that survives when the two prior sites

¹On the sacred as a collective force set apart from the profane, see Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912); on the numinous, Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (1917).

²On disenchantment, see Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation" (1917); on the detachment of the sign, Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), and Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981).

have exhausted their conditions. Artificial intelligence is the occasion and the catalyst of this exposure rather than its cause, since it completes the reproducibility of the sign and thereby brings the defect of the symbolic site fully into view.

The claim of this paper is therefore historical and modest in form. It is that the site to which the excess beyond the individual is attributed has moved once before, from the transcendent to the symbolic, and appears to be moving again, from the symbolic to the relational, and that this second movement is driven by the same kind of material exhaustion that drove the first. In its relational form, the excess is lodged neither in a source beyond the human nor in a self-grounding sign, but comes to rest in the generative potential of the relational being itself, the good and unsignifiable power a relation has to bring forth what its members could not bring forth apart. The remainder of the paper concerns this relational form of value and practice, the manner in which capital captures it, the standard by which its good realization can be told from its capture, and the condition under which it can be sustained.

6 RELATIONAL WEALTH

Relational wealth is the value borne by the experiential structure shared among subjects, whose reproduction generates new value and new circuits of value, and which is in general not reducible to quantitative measure [7]. Its bearer is a shared experiential structure rather than an isolated object or a private mental state, its mode of existence is generative in that its use is its reproduction, and its measure is in the ordinary case absent. Five characteristics mark it off from the wealth of classical political economy, each stated against the corresponding classical feature. It is *non-consumable*, used without being used up, and in the ordinary case increased rather than depleted by its use, where classical wealth is consumed. It is *inseparable from the subject*, constitutive of those between whom it obtains and unable to be detached and handed over, where classical wealth is alienable. It is *generative*, each reproduction opening new value and new circuits of valuation, where classical wealth is at best conserved. It *resists quantification*, admitting no faithful monetary price, its incommensurability a property of the thing rather than a defect of measurement, where classical wealth is operationally measurable. And it is *independent of symbolic power*, constituted and secured in the shared practice of subjects rather than by the stamp, the charter, or the enforceable title, where classical wealth is characteristically secured by symbolic power.

Within the Lacanian reading of this paper, a further and more specific claim can be added, which belongs to the present framework and does not form part of the general definition. Relational wealth, so understood, lies near the constitutive lack, the empty place around which desire circles.³ The proximity of relational value to the empty place is the source of its force. To be received without condition, to be allowed to depend and to be indulged, to be held, are the adult relation's nearest echo of the lost original security. They move the subject at the level of its deepest lack, with a force no consumer preference commands. This is why relation is the

³The three-layer account of value that underwrites this specific reading, distinguishing an imaginary value organized around the idol and exhaustible, a symbolic value that is commensurable and virtualizable, and a real value organized around the empty place and non-possessable, is developed in [9]. Real value alone carries genuinely internal, non-extracted surplus.

richest possible ore for any operation that would capture desire, since to divert a desire that circles near the empty place mobilizes far more energy than to divert a surface preference. Capital's turn to relational value is a turn toward the source of desire itself, and this is at once what makes the turn so powerful and what makes its capture so destructive, for the ore is destroyed by the very act of extraction.

7 THE CHAIN OF CAPTURE

THESES: THE CHAIN OF CAPTURE Capital manufactures neither desire nor the lack. It captures relational value by a formal chain: a relational property is stripped from its relation, reified into an individual attribute, the constitutive lack is disguised as the lack of that attribute, and the attribute is bound to a commodity offered as the object of desire. Desire is the current that runs through this chain, and capital's art is to reroute that current and to draw off value at each rerouting.

Capital manufactures neither desire nor the lack. Both precede it. What capital industrializes is the fantasy that supports desire and the *objet a* that occupies it, and its operation upon relational value proceeds in four moves.

The first move captures a relational phenomenon. Consider the disposition, in a safe and accepting relation, to allow oneself to depend, to presume, to be indulged. Its condition is relational. One does not presume upon a stranger. This disposition is the proof and the product of relational depth, an exposure of vulnerability that says, I trust you enough to be undignified before you. It is real value, generated only in the field of a particular relation.

The second move strips the phenomenon from its relation and names it an attribute. To recast a relational disposition as a personal quality one can possess and display and be, is to erase the relation and leave a wearable label. The step is decisive, because once the disposition is severed from relation and made an attribute, it can be mediated by a commodity, since an attribute can be purchased and a relation cannot.

The third move substitutes the lack. The subject's true lack is the constitutive one, structural and irreparable. Through the fantasy it now administers, capital lets the subject misrecognize this lack as the lack of a particular attribute, the lack of being lovable, of being a certain kind of person. The irreparable lack is disguised as a reparable one, and anxiety is the tension of that disguise, a lack that can never be closed yet feels each time about to close.

The fourth move binds the attribute to the commodity and offers it as the substitute for the object of desire. The true source of the disposition, a safe and accepting relation, is concealed, and a false source, the correct purchase, is installed in its place. The chain, with desire supplied as its current, reads:

$$\underbrace{\text{lack}}_{\text{constitutive}} \longrightarrow \text{desire} \longrightarrow \$ \diamond a \xrightarrow{\text{capital captures the fantasy}} a_{\text{commodified}} \xrightarrow{a \text{ fails}} a' \longrightarrow \text{extraction.}$$

Desire is not a link in this chain. It is the current that runs through it, issuing from a place capital can neither produce nor satisfy, and capital's whole art is to reroute that current and to

draw off value at each rerouting.

8 HOW CAPITAL STRENGTHENS THE CIRCUIT

THESIS: FAILURE AS ENGINE Capital does not seek to satisfy desire, for satisfaction would end the circuit. It industrializes the fantasy on which desire runs and reworks the necessary failure of the object of desire into the gear of repetition. The object veils the empty place and cannot fill it, so it fails by its nature, and each failure is met at once with the next object. Disappointment is the circuit's motive power, the very thing that drives it forward.

Capital does not attempt to satisfy desire, for satisfaction would end the circuit. It takes over the production of the fantasy on which desire runs, and it reworks the necessary failure of the *objet a* into the gear of a perpetual motion. Four operations strengthen the circuit.

The first is the industrial pre-fabrication of fantasy, the offering of a finished scene ready to be claimed in place of one the subject would build, which lowers the threshold of desire's operation as fast food lowers the threshold of eating. The second is the commodification of the *objet a*, the systematic shaping of the object that supports fantasy into the form of a commodity, so that each running of desire passes through a purchase. The third, and the most precise, takes the failure of the *objet a* and puts it to work in the open. The object veils the empty place and does not fill it, so that once obtained it discloses that it is not the thing, and desire slides toward the next object. Capital uses this failure openly. The subject obtains the object, experiences that this is not it, and is supplied at that same moment with the next. The seasonal turnover, the new model, the rotation of trends, is a conveyor of objects whose motive power is disappointment, each failure advancing the belt one place, the structural frustration of desire engineered into sustainable repetition. The fourth is the manufacture of anxiety through the substituted lack, since anxiety is the proof that the fantasy still requires its object.

Taken together, these disclose that the ultimate product is the fantasy itself, the commodity being only the vehicle of the *objet a*. What is paid for is the scene in which, were one to possess this, one would be complete. The deepest power of this industry is its appropriation of the subject's desire, of the way it imagines its own completion, of the very shape of its lack, a hold that reaches past the subject's labor into its wanting. When this industry turns upon relational value, it takes as its raw material the disposition that lies nearest the empty place, and so obtains the most concentrated fantasy fuel available. The turn to relation is capital's drilling toward the source of desire.

9 GENERATIVE JUSTICE AND THE GOOD CYCLE

The standard by which a relational circuit is judged rests on a prior ethics, the ethics of relational reproduction developed by the present author within the framework of generative relational being [8]. That ethics states the conditions under which a relation may reproduce itself justly.

The ethics of relational reproduction: five principles A just relational reproduction satisfies five necessary conditions. **Generativity:** it does not foreclose the participants' capacity to keep generating. **Co-reproduction:** the relation is reproduced through joint participation and not by the decision of one party alone. **Non-exploitation:** it does not depend on the instrumentalization or sacrifice of any participant. **Restraint and non-entrenchment of power:** since the generation of value carries power, it generates at the same time the counter-power that restrains power and prevents its entrenchment. **Subject preservation:** it does not purchase unity by effacing the other as a subject. Coincidence is not the aim; the preservation of difference and of the subject is what makes continued generation possible.

These five are the ground. What follows restates the part of this ground that bears on the circulation of value, in the language of generative justice, so that particular circuits can be examined.

CRITERION: THE GOOD CYCLE Whether a relational circuit is good or exploitative is decided at more than one point, and the reality of the relation, genuine in either case, leaves the matter open. Within the circulation, a good cycle keeps the surplus it generates inside it rather than surrendering it to an owner of the field, a positive holonomy, which is the core of what generative justice names. At its origin, a good cycle draws on a lack that is native to the human condition rather than one manufactured and then bound to a commodity, so that entry into the relation is not gated by purchase. A circuit may be just in its circulation, its surplus co-created and shared, and still fail at the origin, if it makes the very possibility of relation depend on a good that must be bought, which excludes those who cannot pay and deepens the division of relational wealth along the division of economic wealth. Justice in a relational circuit therefore concerns its origin, its field, and the circulation itself.

Before the specimens can be judged, a criterion is required, for the claim that one relational circuit exploits and another does not cannot rest on intuition. The criterion restates the ethics of relational reproduction in the language of generative justice and states it geometrically.⁴

A cycle of value returns, but it need not return to its origin unchanged. A good cycle closes and, in closing, leaves an internal surplus that was generated within it and extracted by no one, so that the participants end higher than they began. In the language of holonomy, the loop has a positive holonomy, a real gain accrued around the circuit and retained inside it. An evil cycle either merely repeats, adding nothing, a holonomy of zero, or it extracts, drawing the surplus out of the relation and into an external possessor, a negative holonomy for those within. This is justice within the circulation itself, and it concerns the co-creation of the value, its passage without extraction, and its return to those who co-created it. The decisive test within the circulation is whether any participant is rendered mere fuel.

⁴The criterion follows the generative justice of [4], and its geometric form in terms of holonomy is developed in [9]. The three points of justice, the origin, the field, and the circulation, are the reproduction ethics of [8] projected onto the circulation of value: a manufactured and commodity-bound origin offends generativity and non-exploitation, a monopolized field offends the restraint of power, and extraction within the circulation offends co-reproduction.

Justice within the circulation does not exhaust the question, for a cycle can be just in its circulation and unjust in its origin. The origin of a relational cycle is the lack it answers. A relation may answer a lack native to the human condition, the constitutive lack every person carries, in which case its origin is innocent. Or a circuit may first manufacture a lack, install the sense that one is deficient without a certain good, and bind the good to a commodity, so that the relation it then sustains is entered only through a purchase. Such a circuit can run a genuinely positive cycle downstream, in which the enterprise gains, the bond is strengthened, and every party inside appears to gain, while its origin remains unjust, because it has made the possibility of relation depend on the ability to pay. The injustice does not show inside the circulation, where the holonomy may be positive. It lies at the point of entry, and it is measured by whom the entry excludes.

The consequence of an unjust origin is a division of relational wealth. Relational divinity, in principle, does not depend on the scarcity of any mark, and is therefore available in principle to all, including those with no economic wealth. When a circuit binds the possibility of relation to a commodity, it re-imposes scarcity on what need not be scarce, and it excludes those who cannot pay from the relational wealth as it already excludes them from economic wealth. The poor are then held outside twice, kept from economic wealth by the market and from relational wealth by the gate the market has placed upon relation. This is why the origin of a cycle matters as much as its circulation, and why a positive holonomy inside a circuit does not by itself acquit it.

This criterion does two things at once. It gives relational divinity a measure, so that the term names a structure, a coupling whose surplus is internal and shared, and something firmer than a mood. And it separates two things that the phenomenology runs together, the reality of a relation and the justice of its circuit, since a relation may be entirely real and its cycle nonetheless unjust, whether at its origin, its field, or within its circulation. The specimens that follow are read by this measure, and they were chosen because each fails at a different one of the three points, the first at the origin, the second at the field, the third within the circulation.

10 TWO SPECIMENS: THE MANUFACTURED ORIGIN AND THE MONOPOLIZED FIELD

Two specimens precede the dialectical case, and each fails the criterion at a different point. The first is unjust at its origin, where it manufactures a lack and binds relation to a commodity. The second is unjust at the field, which it monopolizes. The dialectical case that follows them is just at its origin, since it answers a lack native to the human condition, and unjust within the circulation, where a genuine surplus is drawn off. The origin, the field, and the circulation are the three points at which a relational circuit can fail, and the three specimens exhibit them in turn.

The first specimen is the claim, propounded across a certain lifestyle media, that a disposition belonging to intimacy is a personal virtue to be acquired, with cosmetics and goods offered as its means. The subject here is a claim rather than a magazine, and the claim does not simply fail to produce relation. It can in fact make certain relations possible, since a gift or a shared object can become the medium through which a bond forms, and the cycle it sets running can

be genuinely positive downstream, the enterprise gaining, the bond strengthened through the very disposition it trades on, every party inside appearing to gain. Its injustice is therefore not that it produces no relation and merely parasitizes meaning. Its injustice is at the origin. It takes the caring presentation of vulnerability, the wish to be received and indulged, which is real only within a relation, and it manufactures from it a lack, the sense that one is deficient in a personal quality one does not possess. It then binds the repair of that lack to a commodity, so that the disposition, and the relation it belongs to, are entered through a purchase. The cycle downstream may be positive, yet the origin is unjust, because it has made a possibility of relation depend on the ability to pay.

The consequence is the division of relational wealth described above. What was in principle available to anyone, the depth of a bond in which one may presume and be indulged, is re-bound to a good that must be bought, and those who cannot buy are excluded from the relational wealth as they are already excluded from the economic wealth. The charge that runs through the claim is genuine, since the longing it addresses is a genuine longing for real relation, and this is exactly why it works. The injustice operates through the true value of the thing, not against it, and it operates at the point of entry rather than within the circulation.

The monopolist is the platform [14]. It need enclose no particular relation, for it monopolizes the field in which relation becomes possible, and it draws a ground rent on all the relational value generated within it [16].⁵ Concretely, it takes a commission on what passes through it, charges for access, and turns the attention and the relational traces of its users into a further thing to sell, drawing value at each point without generating the relation from which that value comes. This is the move from owning land to holding the sole water on which all land depends. The collector of such rent produces nothing and draws value solely by its monopoly over an unreproducible condition of production. Its most insidious feature is that, having monopolized the field, its interest lies in keeping relation forever possible and never fulfilled, since fulfillment means departure from the field and the end of the rent. A service that monopolizes the field of encounter has a reverse incentive never to let encounter consummate, and must keep encounter perpetually possible and never complete, extracting from the possibility of relation while preventing its realization. By the criterion, the platform is extraction raised to a structural principle, a negative holonomy imposed on the field of relation as such, reaching past this or that particular relation, and it inverts the good cycle's openness, since where the refusal of closure can serve generative freedom, the platform's refusal of closure serves a perpetual draw on the field.

⁵Ground rent is the payment a landowner draws by virtue of owning a scarce and unreproducible condition of production, the land on which others must work, rather than by producing anything. The owner adds nothing to the harvest and yet takes a share of it, because access to the ground can be had only through them. The platform stands in the same position with respect to relation: it does not produce the bond, but it owns the field on which the bond must form, and so takes a share of the value that others generate there.

THESES: THE AKB48 MODEL The AKB48 model is a singular and exceptional case, an exception within the field of the idol enterprise rather than its type. Where the traditional idol enterprise sustained what may be called a quasi-transcendent divinity, an unreachable image set at a distance and seeming to hold an unlimited aura, resting on the scarcity of the signifier and echoing the transcendent divinity described above, this model turned toward relational divinity, generated within the bond between members and between members and supporters. It is thereby a highly advanced step by which capital contends with its own limit in the domain of relation, an intuition of a high order that anticipated the value of relation before the symbolic crisis was manifest. Its origin is just, for it answers a lack native to the human condition, the wish to connect and to be witnessed, and manufactures no lack and gates no entry by purchase. Its injustice lies within the circulation, where the relational value the bond generates is drawn off by capital rather than kept by those who generate it, which is exactly the extraction that generative justice names. The model thus carries an advance and a limit together. The advance is real. The limit is a weakness of the capital form itself rather than a fault of execution, its incapacity, having reached relation, to refrain from extracting the value that circulates within it, so that its advance is the condition of its exploitation and its exploitation the form of its advance, two faces of a single act.

Between the parasite that produces no relation and the platform that monopolizes the field stands a case that produces relation and is captured by it. The case is the AKB48 model, and it is singular. It is not offered as the type of the idol enterprise, most of which sustained the older quasi-transcendent divinity, but as an exception within that field, and it must be held in a strict double focus, for it is at once two opposite things, and the coincidence is the whole of its interest.

It is, first, a highly advanced attempt by capital to contend with its own limit in the domain of relation, an intuition of a very high order. When the model arose, the crisis of the symbolic was not yet manifest. Its turn away from the unreachable idol and toward the reachable one, toward the bond, toward the connection among members and between members and supporters, was therefore not a strategy calculated against a visible crisis. It was a self-arising intuition ahead of its own historical meaning, one that touched, before the theory of it existed, the truth that value could be anchored in relation rather than in the unreachable aura of the signifier. This is precisely what sets AKB48 apart from the idol enterprise in general, most of which continued to trade on distance and the scarcity of the image. The later manifestation of the symbolic crisis confirmed this prescience after the fact, having played no part in creating it, and the model's creator has since said in as many words that the connection, the *tsunagari*, among the members, member to member, is the most precious thing and the one thing unique to AKB48. That statement marks the moment the intuition became conscious of itself. The advance is real and must be granted in full, for it shows a rare instance of capital touching the value of relation earlier and more clearly than most, and touching, in outline, the very thing this paper calls

relational divinity, a relational rather than a quasi-transcendent form of the divine.

It is, second, and at the same time and by the same movement, a capital commodity in which the extraction of relational value is constitutive. Its origin is just. The lack it answers is the native human wish to connect and to be witnessed, and it manufactures no deficiency and gates no entry by purchase, which sets it apart from the lifestyle claim examined above. The injustice enters within the circulation. The relation it generates is real. There is genuine joint authorship, the supporter's witness and participation truly shaping the member's course, and a real return from member to supporter, a bond that closes and in closing rises, adding to itself where a mere repetition would not. By the criterion of generative justice, this is, at the level of the bond itself, a good cycle, a positive holonomy generated between member and supporter. And precisely this good cycle is what is made extractable. The real bond and the symbolic extraction are wound together inseparably, the ticket bound to the disc, the ballot that monetizes affection into a contest of consumption, so that the real relation becomes the fuel of an extraction that encircles it. The surplus generated within the relation is drawn off by one who owns the circuit. The functions of the bond are outsourced to a commercial big Other, the enterprise, the rules, the right to monetize, and pass out of the hands of the relational subject who might have reclaimed them, which makes this a relational divinity mediated by a commercial owner, a semblance or half-realization of the mechanism. The ownership and control of the value the relation generates belong to capital. The connection is real, yet the right to monetize it, to set its rules, to distribute its surplus, is held by the owner of the field. Toward the supporter the system wears the appearance of empowerment. Toward the member it is largely domination, discipline, and replaceability. The same system empowers at one end and extracts at the other.

The dialectical hinge is that these two are two faces of a single act, distinct from any account that would make them two parts or two stages. The way the model breaks capital's symbolic limit is the very way it makes relation a commodity. The more successfully it generates a real good cycle, the more efficiently it renders that cycle an extractable object, for the fuel extracted is exactly the surplus the good cycle produces. Its advance is the condition of its exploitation, and its exploitation is the form of its advance. The two constitute each other. This is why a more perfect execution of the same model would leave the limit in place. The limit lies in the capital form by which the model is realized, beyond any shortfall in doing the thing well. Capital can intuit the value of relation ahead of everyone, and cannot, within the capital form, refrain from drawing off the surplus that the relation generates. The model has a relational-divine cycle without an ownership base to match, and so the good cycle is captured in reverse by the ownership beneath it. The divergence between this case and a genuine relational commons⁶ lies in whom the surplus and the field belong to, beyond aesthetics and beyond the reality of the bond. What the case proves is twofold and exact. It proves that capital can reach relation and generate a real good cycle, and it proves that capital cannot, within its own form, keep from

⁶By a relational commons is meant a field of relation held in common by its participants rather than owned by an external party, in which the surplus the relation generates belongs to those who generate it, the rules are legislated by the participants themselves, and no single owner draws value from the field. It stands opposed to the platform and to the ownership base of the AKB48 model, where the field and its surplus are held by a commercial owner. The conditions that define it are set out in the section on ownership below.

enclosing it.

12 THE FARTHEST FRONTIER: SYNTHETIC CO-PRESENCE

The capture of relation has a frontier beyond the capture of an existing relation, the manufacture of co-presence itself. Genuine co-presence is costly in a structural sense, requiring shared time, unrepeatable contingency, and the mutual exposure of vulnerability, and capital's standing operation upon whatever is costly is to make the scarce and unreproducible cheap and reproducible. Applied to co-presence, this yields the templated collective moment sold and duplicated, the algorithmically synthesized companion that supplies the feeling of being accompanied and witnessed while no real other stands at the far end, a decohered co-presence in which the sign of the shared moment is kept and its real is absent. The point here is only to mark this frontier. At its origin such a circuit answers no native lack and instead simulates the very relation it purports to offer, and by the criterion this is the origin injustice in its purest form, since what is entered by the subject is not a relation at all.

13 THE QUESTION OF SUSTAINING: OWNERSHIP

THE QUESTION OF OWNERSHIP The AKB48 case suggests where the sustaining of a good relational cycle is decided, and it does so by posing a question rather than prescribing an answer. A cycle may be good at the level of the bond and still be captured at the level of the field, and the difference lies in whom the surplus and the field belong to. The question this raises, and leaves open, concerns ownership: to whom the surplus a relation generates belongs, who legislates the rules of the field, and whether the field is arranged so that its interest lies in relation truly occurring and, where it will, departing. The paper poses the question and does not answer it for any case.

One path can be marked off at the outset as a false one. If capital's operation is to reroute desire, supply a substitute object, and draw off value, then a relational alternative cannot answer it by supplying a better object of desire, for to supply a better *objet a* is to remain within the fantasy industry with a more refined product. This is the trap the idealist most readily enters, making of a relational or communal project a fantasy of the real, a more alluring object, the scene in which, had one only joined this community, one would be complete. Such a project reproduces the very structure it opposes, an object that veils the empty place, that necessarily fails, that holds its adherents by that failure. The good cycle is not secured by a better fantasy.

Where it is secured, if it is, the AKB48 case indicates the level at which the matter is settled, which is ownership rather than aesthetics or the reality of the bond. A relational cycle may be entirely good at the level of the bond and entirely captured at the level of the field, and the difference lies in whom the surplus and the field belong to. This locates the question without closing it. The value a relation generates, the rules of its field, and the interest the field is arranged to serve are the terms in which the question of ownership is posed, and how a given

case answers them is left to those who hold the case in view.

For this reason ownership is better treated as an ontological question than an administrative one, a question about what a field of relation is and to whom it belongs, ahead of any question about how it is run. The AKB48 case reached relation and could not, within the capital form, release the surplus that relation generates, and the limit it met was the weakness of that form rather than a shortfall in its execution. What lies beyond that limit is a change in the ownership base, and whether and how such a change is possible in a given case is the question the paper leaves with the reader, in the manner of a generative pedagogy that poses the problem rather than dictating its solution [4].

14 CONCLUSION

The argument has moved from a crisis to a question. The crisis is the cheapening of the signifier, arising from a convergence of material conditions rather than from any single cause, and its deepest phenomenological mark is the return of what the sign can no longer hold. As the signifier is cheapened, the older labor of producing lack through it grows difficult, and value migrates toward the one thing the reproduction of signifiers cannot cheapen, which is relation. That relation is the unsymbolizable in its positive form, and the value it bears is relational wealth, borne by a shared experiential structure, non-consumable, inseparable from its subjects, and resistant to price. Named at its ground, it is relational divinity, the good and not fully signifiable generative potential of the relational subject, the subject understood as the ensemble of its social relations, to bring forth in value and in practice what none could bring forth alone.

Capital captures this value through the same structure of desire it once worked through the signifier, rerouting desire to a substitute object and drawing off value at the rerouting, and it reaches relational value most powerfully because relation lies nearest the empty place around which desire turns. Whether a given circuit is just is a matter its felt reality cannot settle, and it is decided at three points, the origin at which a lack is either native or manufactured, the field on which relation forms and which may be monopolized, and the circulation within which the surplus is either kept by those who generate it or drawn off. These three restate, in the language of generative justice, the ethics of relational reproduction, whose principles are generativity, co-reproduction, non-exploitation, the restraint of power, and the preservation of the subject.

The AKB48 case gathered these into a single figure, a real and advanced good cycle just at its origin and captured within its circulation, and it showed that capital can reach relation and cannot, in its own form, release the value that circulates within it. That limit is the weakness of the capital form itself rather than any fault of execution, and what lies beyond it is a change in the ownership base, in whom the surplus a relation generates and the field on which it forms belong. Whether such a change is possible, and what it would mean to sustain relational value outside the capital form, is the question the analysis arrives at and hands to the reader, who alone can see where a given case, held in view, comes to stand.

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