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# The Good Intense “Loves” the Bad Intense: Intensity and the Death Drive

## Abstract

The article analyzes the concept of intensity promoted in late capitalism, and its difference from the teleological intensity of the countercultural sixties. Intensity is approached through psychoanalytic lenses as related to Freud’s drive theory, and to Lacan’s concept of *jouissance*. Counter-depressive intensity persists today devoid of any meaning, as it is a self-legitimizing strategy of the most perfect and best conformed capitalist subject. The notion of the culture of intensity covers the natural privileging of late capitalism towards ‘the good intense.’ This paper analyzes its reverse: ‘the bad intense,’ and the tragedy of dysphoria. The movie *Shame* (2011), directed by Steve McQueen, is interpreted as an example of the transformation of the countercultural value of sexuality in the sixties to its mere reduction to both intense and numbing experience.

Keywords: intensity, Eros, death drive, *jouissance*, euphoria, counterculture

*The true object of jouissance – if that word means anything – is death. The quest is not, as some say, for “some pleasure”; the quest is more precisely for the verification of the colour of emptiness.*

*(Eric Laurent)*

## 1. Introduction

This paper analyzes the concept of intensity promoted in late capitalism as the only life worthy of living. Immoderation, extreme experiences, intensity gone astray and energy gone awry, living your life to the full, transgressing the borders which previously separated life and death, have been inherited from the countercultural sixties. Yet, the moment in which the mainstream culture adopted

intensity, it itself lost all of its revolutionary and countercultural potential. Counter-depression, the denial of depression, and (hypo)mania seem to be operating in the mainstream discourse as late capitalism defences. What is the main difference between the still teleological intensity of the sixties and the intensity in the 21st century? How does the famous trio “sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll” fare in the first decades of this millennium?

The concept of intensity is multiform and strongly value-laden, yet it appears as a free-floating signifier which exists as clearly defined in the mechanistic discourse alone; on the other hand, it merely has its approximations in different non-mechanical discourses as it has been mentioned – in contemporary culture it exists in the form of ecstasy and euphoria, in the counterculture as a religious peak experience and as utmost sexual fulfillment, and in psychoanalytic theory it can be best approximated to Lacan’s concept of *jouissance*.

Thus, the definition of the concept will proceed via its significance in and for psychoanalytic theory although it does not figure as a psychoanalytic concept *stricto sensu*. For the psychoanalyst intensity immediately evokes ecstasy, euphoria, energy, and impulsive affects of both poles. *Jouissance* as intensity will be considered in relation to other psychoanalytic notions, mainly those inherited from classical psychoanalysis, which appears to be an appropriate strategy as Lacan’s concepts are formulated mostly as the rewriting of Freud’s notions. Thus, *jouissance* as intensity has to be equally considered in the framework of the energetic discourse of psychoanalysis, and related to homeostasis – the principle of constancy, as entirely opposed to it, and to the two principles of mental functioning explained by Freud – the pleasure principle and the reality principle. *Jouissance* is clearly on the side of the pleasure principle, sometimes to such an extent that it can completely wipe out and dislocate the reality principle.

The movie *Shame* (2011), directed by Steve McQueen, will be interpreted as an example of the transformation of the cultural value of (intense) sexuality in the sixties to its mere reduction to both intense and numbing experience. The movie has been chosen to illustrate the mysterious ways of intensity as sexual intensity due to the fact that sexual drives remain longest under the reign of the pleasure principle as they are, so to speak, the most stubborn urges, refusing to conform to the reality principle. In this sense, the movie *Shame* is interpreted via the path which the millennium has taken in respect of intensity as such, where sexual intensity is merely one of its offshoots but

surely the most conspicuous one. Intensity, as sexual intensity, is clearly located on the side of the energetic discourse, and devoid of its hermeneutic value, as it appears to be meaning-less, while the values previously attached to sexuality, i.e. in the counterculture, as a mystical and communal experience have no place whatsoever in the way it is being practiced by the protagonist, as sexuality comes to be increasingly located further away from the area in which attachment and emotional bonds play a prominent part.

Other than being divorced and severed from attachment, sexuality, furthermore, even when considered and practiced as intensity, fails to provide what it purports to be. The feeling that the (sexual) thrill is gone pervades the millennium. Eros is tainted by Thanatos in this newly formed energetic discourse, in which the flow of sexual energy replaces any subjective experience and emotional involvement in the practice of sexuality, while it functions on the reductive instinctual level, representing a painful compensatory mechanism for the inability to feel and for the loss of intimacy.

Intensity will be viewed through psychoanalytic lenses also as the wrongly interpreted battle of the two equally powerful drives, Eros and Thanatos, of the wrongly conceived striving toward *jouissance*, which is also lethal. Starting with the countercultural sixties and their demise in the form of Thanatos, this article explores the circuitous path of the naïveté about the drive theory: that the violent and ecstatic expression of Eros never unleashes the thanatic drives. Intensity as it is promoted today falls largely within the energetic discourse, be it the corporate discourse or its ideological complement – the new age. The reduction of the human to the level of either highly energetic organism or a well-functioning and well-oiled machine obliterates subjective experience as such. Counter-depressive intensity persists today, devoid of any meaning, as it is a self-legitimizing strategy of the most perfect and best conformed capitalist subject. The trap of late capitalism, when related to the forms of intensity, consists in the fact that hypomanic personality is both a (hypo)manic producer and a (hypo)manic consumer. The notion of ‘the culture of intensity’ covers the natural privileging of the humans of late capitalism towards ‘the good intense.’ The “little” thing that we should learn about is that the good intense cannot come into being without its evil counterpart – the bad intense.

In their article “Borderline Personality Disorder from a Psychopathological-Dynamic Perspective” (2009) Rossi Monti and D’Agostino point to the investigations which reveal that the high levels of harm avoidance and novelty seeking in borderline patients strongly challenge the idea that the aim of destructive behaviors is simply to inflict pain and cause damage to oneself or the others. “On the contrary – and paradoxically – even when the behavior clearly appears harmful to the subject, the goal is to avoid a greater damage. In the words of a self-mutilating patient: ‘It is like staunching a kind of pain with another kind of pain.’” (456-57).

It has to be mentioned in this introductory part that in Deleuze and Guattari’s works a strong link has been formed between capitalism, energy and intensity, in the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972-1980). The urge for the free flow of libidinal energy against the capitalist repressive territorialisation has also been explained very convincingly by Jean-François Lyotard in his works *Dérive à partir Marx et Freud* (1971) and *Libidinal Economy* (1974). The contemporary link between capitalism and borderline states can be reformulated: the production of the best conformed capitalist subject as the intense subject who is lured by intensity through the capitalist mode of production and consumption, and yet, at the same time, threatened by intensity in terms of its effects on the personality structure, emotional (de)regulation, and the mode of affective disposition. The reason for not grounding this article on the works of these authors is the following: the main point of this article is not the production of intensity nor intense personality in the capitalist mode of production, no matter how important these issues are, but rather the location of intensity in psychoanalysis, and the shift in its cultural meaning.

## **2. A Few Remarks on (Sexual) Intensity in the Sixties**

The contemporary culture of intensity should be related to its origins in the countercultural ethos where psychological experiments and peak experiences of the “psychonauts” were considered as highly teleological. In the sixties the personal became the political, expressed in the New Left’s and countercultural view that no social or political change is effective unless it comprises a psychological transformation of the individual, a change in the personality structure.<sup>[1]</sup>

The 1960s' culture of intensity is closely related to the drug culture, especially to the psychedelic culture which promoted and advocated the use of psychoactive drugs.<sup>[2]</sup> In his book *The Hippies and American Values* (1991), in the chapter "The Ethics of Dope," Timothy Miller points to the distinction between dope and drugs, which runs counter to the popular belief that all drugs in the countercultural sixties were deemed – good, although this difference is certainly not a sharp one:

*"Psychedelics were good; speed and downers were bad. Substances that were perceived as expanding consciousness were good; things that made the user dumb were bad ... Dope was utterly intrinsic to the counterculture. The hippies believed that dope itself had altered the consciousness of millions of individuals in fundamental ways, and that that alteration was inevitably a major force in the establishment of the new culture" (25-26).*

Bad substances were considered as consciousness shrinking drugs, and their use was tightly related to the intermittent use of uppers and downers, which meant, on the psychological, social, and political level – the will and wish to remain in the state of complete numbness, and which ran counter to the countercultural primary request for transformation. Psychological transformation was hailed as enhancing all other types of transformations – cultural, social, and political – but "the commitment to dope was the single largest symbol of the difference between counterculture and Establishment culture" (Miller 25).

Both the ethics of sex and the ethics of rock were subsumed under the drug culture so that the swinging sixties' intensity resonates well in the popular slogan: "Sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll," while it is clear that drugs were central to the countercultural demands. Ever since the demise of the counterculture, the intensity of the period has been adopted by the mainstream and popular culture, not to mention its prominence in the advertising culture. However, this type of bare intensity has lost its entire countercultural teleological vein, and it is indeed the question whether they even deserve the same name. The millennial intensity appears to be the self-defeating confirmation of the slogan "live your life to the fullest," while it shows the absence of life's directedness or personality developmental goals. It evokes the circular movement between intense experiences and the post-intensity depletion. "It is easy to observe that the hippies were overly optimistic about the power dope held for good and naive about the downside of drugs in general.

However, the hippies enunciated an ethics of drugs that made more overall sense than any ethics or policies prevailing in the drug-hysterical 1990s” (Miller 27).

In the chapter “The Ethics of Sex,” Timothy Miller emphasizes how the sixties represented the era where sex acquired an entirely different meaning. The emancipatory power of sexuality was closely related to its centeredness on pleasure seeking. However, the countercultural ethics of sex owes a great deal to the Playboy magazine as much as it owes to the underground media. Sexual liberation was conceived as the liberation from the self-imposed repression, as well as the recognition of the repression imposed onto others. Complete and authentic sexual liberation comprised non-judgmental attitudes in relation to other people’s lives and the ways they lived them, especially in the sexual domain. The symbol of free life became nudity, which was considered natural and entertaining, just as sex, while the clothes were considered as armor, hiding the body and hindering human communication, and nudity comprised the beauty of the body in its entirety. A clear parallel was established between drugs consumption and sexual activity, as both comprised the freedom to reach psychic and physical pleasure, while drugs were seen as enhancing sexual experience (Miller).

While clearly emphasizing the teleological and revolutionary edge of the swinging sixties, related to the drug use and sexual behavior, it is beyond doubt that the guilt-free but also strongly apolitical hedonism was present in the countercultural sixties almost from the beginning. While both sexual practices and drug use were the symbols of dissent, the massification of the counterculture and its repositioning from the margin towards the centre made the counterculture into a mainstream, pop-cultural movement, which also led to its demise in the early seventies. When the signifiers of the counterculture turned into their opposite, when they became estranged from the battle against consumerism, mass production, and commodification, they soon became the fertile ground for exploitation – the moment in which the counterculture was doomed to expire. The mass of young people who adhered to the countercultural movement at a later stage consumed drugs because that was popular, and engaged in liberated sex for the same reasons. It simply became popular to be hip by which the opposition hip-square no longer signified anything more than the difference in life-style.<sup>[3]</sup>

David Farber (2002) emphasizes how the demise of the counterculture was predictable from its very beginning, related to drugs. He considers that drugs were hailed as liberatory devices in the society which had already been intoxicated by the legal drugs – barbiturates and amphetamines, downers and uppers. So, the difference which is not a difference but rather a continuous line goes from “legally medicated” through “legally intoxicated” to end up in “illegally high,” which happened once the countercultural drugs, especially those psychoactive such as LSD, were made – illegal. “The illegal drugs of choice in the 1960s complicate the reductive exercise. In the 1960s, white middle class youths restocked the medicine chest. In particular, they added marijuana and LSD” (Farber 18):<sup>[4]</sup>

The most powerful literary insight into addiction was, naturally, given by William Burroughs. By this we do not have in mind his semi-autobiographical novels such as *Junkie* (1953), as Burroughs was heavily addicted to heroin most of his adult life, but rather his explication of the structure of the junky via the theory of commodity in the novel *Naked Lunch* (1959). It has to be mentioned, in the first place, that the beat generation with its three corollaries – William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac – was a true inspiration to the protagonists of the counterculture. However, the only one among the three who actively took part in the countercultural movement was Allen Ginsberg.

In his novel *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs goes into an elaborate explication of why and how the junky represents the perfect commodity. Burroughs’s parallel relies on the complete interchangeability of the addict’s person with the bio-chemical processes induced by drugs. Where once there was a personality, subjectivity, it has been completely annulled and made entirely inexistent. That the junky is the perfect commodity means that there is not a single personality trait which remains once the junky has become interchangeable with his chemical weapon, which in Burroughs’s account functions almost as the newly formed blood – so inner, so bodily, or, in Lacanian terms – the subject-free, pure *jouissance* of the body. Burroughs’s fascinating parallels would certainly be corroborated by the scientific data: there is no personality change as dramatic as the one which a heavy addict undergoes; actually, the word ‘change’ is even laudatory here, as the complete wiping out of the personality would be more appropriate, for someone who has lost of all of his human value – commodity per se.

### 3. The Good Intense and the Bad Intense: The Utopia of Euphoria without Dysphoria

Freud's primary drive theory is related to the dynamics between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, and thoroughly explained in his article "Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning" (1911). The frustration coming from the outside slowly transforms the parts of the pleasure principle to conform to the reality principle. However, as Freud claims, sexual drives are stopped in their psychic development and remain much longer under the reign of the pleasure principle. In this way, a tight bond is formed between sexual drives and fantasy on the one hand, and the ego instincts and conscious activity on the other hand. Freud also emphasizes how the replacement of the pleasure principle with the reality principle does not suggest any dethroning of the pleasure principle but merely its securement because the immediate, insecure pleasure is being abandoned in order to gain later, more secure pleasure, and in that sense the reality principle is a roundabout path to satisfaction and gratification.

Laplanche and Pontalis in *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (1973) observe how psychoanalysis places the concept of pleasure at the forefront in relation to the processes (feelings of gratification) and phenomena (dreams) which are clearly unreal, and in this fashion the two principles are entirely antagonistic as the fulfilment of unconscious wishes obeys entirely different laws than the fulfilment of biological needs.

Freud's economic principle defined the relation between pleasure and unpleasure and was led by the principle of homeostasis. Pleasure means the diminishing of external stimuli, and unpleasure the increase of stimuli. The early energetic, homeostatic principle defined already in Freud's unpublished "Project for a scientific psychology" (1895) reappears in its speculative and philosophical form in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), where the compulsion to repeat emerges as the new notion, and the compulsion to repeat includes the repetition of both negative and positive experiences. Thus, the pleasure principle gets its true counterpart in the death drive which comes to be elaborated on the basis of the repetition compulsion.

Eros and the death drive<sup>[5]</sup> are elaborated in the fourth chapter of *The Ego and the Id* (1923). The death drive is manifested in: sadism, masochism, pleasure in pain, and in the cruelty of the punitive and harsh super-ego. The economy of masochism and its counterpart – sadism – leads Freud to the conception that the two types of instincts, death instinct and life instincts, do not exist in a pure state as they are always conflated; secondary masochism represents the introjection of sadism.

While in his first drive theory Freud establishes the difference between the ego drives and sexual drives, his view is that the ego drives are the instincts of self-preservation, and that sexual drives are lethal. Now, with the change of the drive theory, we have two types of drives: those which are death-laden, and those which are life providers. Freud performs a U-turn: the ego drives become death drives, while sexual drives have now passed on the side of life. Freud's second drive theory is initiated already in his elaboration of narcissism and melancholy as he found the ego invested with the death drive in the cases of melancholy, in the psychic torture which the super-ego inflicts on the fragile ego. From then on, narcissism will be located in the vicinity of the death drive.

Declercq contends that Freud's early view on sexuality was that the suppressive morale was responsible for repression, but after thirty years, educated by his clinical practice, in his article on sexual enlightenment, Freud comes to realize "that ultimately the true barriers separating the subject and his drives are not imposed by society. There must thus be another mechanism responsible for the fact that the subject doesn't fully enjoy his sexuality" (Declercq 247).

The conflict within the Id itself, as explained by Paul Ricoeur in his *Freud and Philosophy* (1970) is the most conspicuous in Freud's elaboration of the object-love which reveals the polarisation between love and hate as there exists a sadistic component in sexual instinct, and by this in the object-love where Eros and the death drive overlap. As the sadistic instinct cannot be deduced from Eros, the preserver of life, sadism, the pole of hatred, is the offshoot of the death drive, comprised in every love towards the object: "Narcissistic love is Eros unaware of itself and clandestine cultivation of death. Sexuality is at work wherever death is at work" (Ricoeur 293). Joel Whitebook considers that Eros, which Freud attributes to Narcissus, is most conspicuously present in the frightening congruence of pleasure and death in the Nirvana principle (36).

Freud's "Civilization and Its Discontents," named by Whitebook "negative anthropogenesis" (7), is his cultural take on the death drive, which is being renamed as aggressive and destructive drive. In

the chapter “Eros, Thanatos, Ananke” Ricoeur shows how Freud starts off with the repetition compulsion to the destructive drive, from biology to culture, and thus Beyond the Pleasure Principle represents metabiology, while Civilization and Its Discontents represents metaculture (295-96).

Declercq points out the central difference between Freud’s and Lacan’s views of sexuality: “According to Lacan, sexuality is an intra-subjective difficulty that is only afterwards projected onto the familial, cultural and societal suppressions. In the final analysis, it appears that the suppressions only mask and rationalize the primary and structural heterogeneous relation of the subject towards his drives” (248). In other words, when sexuality is not forbidden, we stare at its very impossibility, and by obeying the restrictions placed onto sexual practices we fare much better as the originary impossibility is clouded by interdiction, by which the sexual impasse is not laid bare.

Jacques Lacan’s concept of *jouissance* comprises its crucial distinction from the pleasure principle: the level of intensity where pleasure turns into pain and ecstasy becomes unbearable. *Jouissance* is the level of intensity tainted by death as the subject may disintegrate in surplus enjoyment. In his article “What Does Lacan Say about... *Jouissance*?” (2015) Owen Hewitson points at the two main definitions of the concept: *jouissance* as an excess of life, which appears as such in Lacan’s Seminar VII, where Lacan calls it “a superabundant vitality,” and *jouissance* as an enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle, dubbed by Lacan as “backhanded enjoyment” in his Seminar X. Or in Lacan’s words: “*Jouissance* begins with a tickle and ends with blaze of petrol” (Hewitson).

Hewitson raises a most important question: “If *jouissance* is an experience of an excess of life, is the death drive not actually its opposite?”, claiming that this idea “seems to run counter to the whole of psychoanalytic metapsychology: what place for psychical conflict if the death drive is just an excess of life?” (Hewitson) Hewitson points out how this apparently paradoxical statement helps us to understand “why people who seem to be ruled by the death drive in cases of excessive *jouissance* are not violent or unpredictable. They can destroy themselves without destroying others” (Hewitson).

Hewitson also points out how Lacan’s idea of *jouissance* evolves over the course of his work, and in the early Seminars “he does not use the term to describe this kind of malevolent enjoyment as

he will come to do later. It is not until Seminar VII that we find Lacan start to talk about jouissance as malevolent or evil”:

*As an excess of enjoyment – an enjoyment that may not even be consciously experienced as such – jouissance is the most powerful counterforce to the work of a psychoanalysis. It is with this surplus that jouissance obtains a kind of “life of its own.” The excess invades or “irrupts” as he puts it here, and leave [sic] us a surplus jouissance. Despite this “paltry” phallic jouissance that we castrated subjects have to deal with, an excess of enjoyment – a plus de jouir – is generated in the place of castration. He calls this a compensation for a loss, and we can think of it as a kind of “plus of a minus” – what he names in Seminar VII as “something that necessitates compensation... for what is initially a negative number.” But then Lacan issues a warning: you have to get rid of this surplus – “it is very urgent that one squander it,” he says in Seminar XVII – or you’re in big trouble” (Hewitson).*

Finally, as Hewitson concludes, the inability to manage a jouissance in the body also manifests itself very forcefully in addiction, quoting Rik Loose’s insights:

*Addiction can produce pleasures for the subject in a manner that is independent of the Other and ... can provide the illusion that there is a pleasure to be obtained that is not curtailed or limited by the social bond. This allows one to understand that some addictions function as a social “short-circuit” symptom and contains the desire to pursue a pleasure beyond normal pleasure. This is a form of addiction that tries to break away from the “cut” of castration, that is to say, it tries to regain what had to be given up, or was lost, as the result of castration. (Loose 69, qtd. in Hewitson)*

#### 4. Cultural “Value” of Intensity

It may be that the first widely known cultural work about euphoria is Pascal Bruckner’s *Perpetual Euphoria: On the Duty to be Happy* (2000), in which he attempts to elaborate how the ideal of happiness, inherited from Enlightenment, has turned with time into the main cultural credo, culminating in the demand for happiness which has brought about serious consequences related to this newly formed happiness imperative. Bruckner holds the main problem to be that after social revolutions in the sixties happiness has turned into a duty. The paradox of this new situation is in his view rather simple: if there is no barrier between the individual and his happiness, the frantic

desire for happiness engenders pressures which in turn make people – unhappy. At the same time, the extreme rise of depressive states points to the prevalent sickness of the society which searches desperately for happiness, and shuts off, or rather obliterates negative emotions in the form of sadness.

Tristan Garcia published *The Life Intense: A Modern Obsession* in 2016 (2018, English translation), where, from the philosophical perspective, he approaches intensity as, unfortunately, the utmost cultural value of the 21st century, with different causations. The values of integrity and moderation have been over centuries replaced by our striving towards the intense:

*Our sports must be extreme, our tastes exotic, our relationships ecstatic and our drugs revelatory. The idea of intensity, of living to the limit has become another way to fill the God-shaped hole, to prove to ourselves that we are fully alive ... Fundamentally, Garcia argues, this quest – like all quests worth their grail – is doomed to end in failure. (Adams)*

In this book, which promises much more than it delivers, Garcia argues that the origin of intensity is to be found in the invention of electricity, and its consequences for human thinking. He traces the religion of the intense “back to the discovery of the vital spark, the current of life. The very idea caused us to chase a fully charged interior world, fizzing with positivity and negativity ... A century of movies and TV and games and social media that fixed the idea that “to live was to be electric” (Adams). Other than relying on electric current, Garcia inscribes the origin of intensity in neo-liberalism, with its leading ideas of performance and intensity, finding a series of electric metaphors in the discourse of neo-liberalism.

The point where Garcia’s argument overlaps, albeit minimally, with psychoanalytic insights is his idea that the opposite of intense is perceived as “lukewarm”: “The opposite of the intense person is the lukewarm person” (Garcia 81). “Other centuries and cultures, he reminds us, those that came before mass advertising, might, however, have seen the opposite as something quite different: balanced, perhaps, or harmonious” (Adams). Intensity has replaced salvation, wisdom, and it is being shared by liberals, hedonists, fundamentalists, and revolutionaries alike. Garcia argues that he was inspired by the works of Deleuze, Bergson, Nietzsche, and Derrida (Garcia X), claiming that intensity designates all sorts of values which approach the real, the true, the non-constructed,

calling it a “metaphysics of intensity” (Garcia 66), yet there are no answers as to how to step out of intense experiences. He wishes to understand why the proclamation of intensity does not produce necessarily the intensification of life but rather engenders fatigue and melancholy.<sup>[6]</sup>

Intensity today has several prominent forms: hypo(mania), euphoria, ecstasy, or the new age directed activities and transformations which are personalized, or predominantly reduced to the personal level of self-perfectioning, and in this apolitical domain the new age represents a perfect ideological complement to late capitalism. The new age theories and techniques are aimed at achieving the altered states of consciousness as different from the countercultural use of drugs. In his “New Age Ideology” (L’ideologie du New Age, 1996), Michel Lacroix argues how the new age is an elaborate melting-pot of the post-countercultural states of narcissistic self-regulation and personal psychic development, which originated in the counterculture but developed mostly in the following “me decades.” A powerful intellectual component of the countercultural intensity was formulated within the realm of the institute Esalen and the human potential movement.<sup>[7]</sup> The first lectures and workshops were delivered by the likes of Gregory Bateson, Aldous Huxley, Abraham Maslow, Fritz Perls and Allan Watts, but the dissenters of the sixties have been replaced in the past forty or so years by corporate middle class.

Lacroix elaborates on the sixties’ drug culture and the attitude towards drugs within the new age movement:

*The proponents of the new age must know that the consciousness altering techniques are in fact substitute for drugs. The new age attitude towards drugs is ambivalent; it would love to maintain drugs as the possibility of opening the mental yet not to accept the danger of physical decay. The new age is a glorified toxicomania. While proposing the substitutes for narcotic experience, the new age diverts the need for drugs towards mysticism (“Ideologija” 34).<sup>[8]</sup>*

In his “Culture of narcissism” (1979) Christopher Lasch contends that after the 1960s’ events the American nation lost all faith in the betterment of their own lives by convincing themselves that the individual psychic perfectioning is the right path, which is the first imperative of the new age ideology, while anxiety and the all-pervasive feeling of inner void dominate. Precisely the fight for

survival in the narcissistic turn inwards – the states of narcissistic self-regulation perfectly resonates with the new age ideology.

## 5. Shame: Plus of a Minus

Syd Field in his “Screenplay” considers that every script consists of three stages: beginning (set-up)-middle (confrontation)-end (resolution), and thus the plot includes a certain level of gradation – the situation and/or the character should change as the plot ends: the protagonist has acquired certain knowledge by which the faith in progress and transformation is established – the possibility that the current problematic state has been surpassed (107). In the film *Shame*, directed by British author and screenwriter Steve McQueen, it is evident that the author challenges the previously mentioned structure, and affirms its opposite or, rather, a counter-structure. The plot is devoid of processuality and development, it is depleted of eventuality. The emphasis is thus placed on the imprisonment of the character in a particular situation which he cannot or refuses to change. Such construction of the plot expresses doubts related to the possible psychological transformation. If the emphasis is not placed on development, than it is being supplanted by the dissection of the state of intensity, which is a constant feature of the main character Brandon Sullivan, from the beginning to the end.

The movie *Shame*, relating to the previous topic of this paper, will be analyzed via the culture of intensity and its sideways. Its representative is Brandon Sullivan (Michael Fassbender), a successful, attractive, and charming New Yorker with an established career in the corporate world, with a corresponding life style: luxurious penthouse, fine restaurants, socializing in trendy clubs, preoccupied with his perfect physique and the impression he provokes in others. One can venture the hypothesis that he is an assuaged version of Patrick Bateman from Bret Easton Ellis’ novel *The American Psycho* (1991), if we discard the homicidal impulses to which Brandon is certainly not prone. While Patrick Bateman was emblematic of the yuppie eighties and the 1980s’ culture of narcissism, Sullivan mirrors multiple traits of the millennial culture, being fully immersed in the American culture of late capitalism and corporate mentality, living the life which is strongly impersonal, typical of the big urban conglomerations.

His everyday routine is broken down into working, going out by day and by night, and into his solitary dwelling in a trendy apartment. Any type of emotional attachment is alien to him, which is explicated through his relationship with his sister Sissy (Carey Mulligan), who comes to New York, and he unwillingly and grudgingly allows her to stay in his apartment. The reason is twofold: she interferes with his daily routine, but she also challenges the emotional armor he has built around himself. At the same time, Brandon is a sex addict, and he fulfills his intense sexual urges in different ways: visiting prostitutes, engaging in online sex talks, consuming various pornographic materials from magazines to DVDs and internet pages, going to sex clubs, and satisfying his urges with casual sex and one-night stands. His routines are reduced to a closed circle of events, people, and spaces.

This reduction of both space and social interaction signals the protagonist's emotional and existential state of mind and mirrors his interior space. An almost mechanical character of his life and his interior despair are rendered by the cyclical structure of the film because the story begins and ends with the same motive of the tube ride when Brandon observes the girl sitting across him. His objectifying gaze results in the interest coming from the receiving end of the gaze. This introductory motive is minimally changed – the same girl is in question, but this time she initiates the eye contact: the film ends with the suggestion that the protagonist has not “learned” anything, that all of his experience amounts to the same.

This repetitive concept is emphasized through discontinuous editing in the prologue of the film as the tube ride is permeated with the sequence of events which have happened that morning in Brandon's apartment, and they are repeated in two versions. Brandon gets up, engages in a sexual intercourse with a prostitute, goes to the bathroom, and while he is walking from the bedroom to the bathroom, his sister's voice follows him through the corridor, coming from the answering machine. She attempts to reach him, but he refuses to answer or respond to her calls. In the finale the tube ride is counterpointed by the scene in which he finds his unconscious sister in the bathroom as she has attempted suicide. His regular way down to the underground almost recalls the descent into the infernal anonymity of the metropolis. McQueen's shots of New York are far from a tourist postcard, as he shows New York in the form of the homogenous landscape of business and residential building complexes, side streets with clubs, often portrayed in nocturnal

and sinister, slightly hallucinatory atmosphere which exudes the alienating aspect of modern urban culture.

Brandon's daily routine operates on two levels: the first is related to his boring, uneventful sequence of going/being late for work, going out, sexual encounters, dwelling in his apartment, and the second is related to his relationship with his sister. Each of the mentioned levels includes one crucial event by which the spectator is directly immersed into the protagonist's worldview and his emotional and existential, anesthesia-like numbness. During the dinner with his work colleague Marianne (Nicole Beharie) Brandon explains his views on emotional relations – relationships and marriage – pointing out how such type of commitment in contemporary world makes no sense although he never, which is significant, arguments his views, as he readily discards emotional relations as an attack to personal freedom, and the intrusion into his personality.

When, while walking the streets of New York, they discuss about their favorite historical period in which they would love to have lived, Brandon responds that he has always dreamed of being a rock musician in the sixties of the twentieth century. Marianne replies that the sixties are for her overly chaotic, and her attitude comes from watching the documentary Gimme Shelter about The Rolling Stones.<sup>[9]</sup> Brandon's choice of the sixties as his ideal era to live and act as a rock star is significant as the sixties are today interpreted via numerous mythologems about free love, the dismantling of traditional institutions like marriage, free exchange of sexual partners, and the rock stars were surrounded by their fans, groupies who were always available for sexual consummation due to the rock stars' aura and their artistic genius. As it has been demonstrated in the theoretical part of this article, the sixties represent the inauguration of the intensity counterculture because the countercultural movement and social liberalization will result in their own parody once transposed to the level of the mainstream culture, co-opted, provoking the odd marriage between the flow of libido and the flow of capital.

Later on Brandon, after having exchanged furtive kisses with Marianne in the office, goes with her to a hotel room – into the exhibitionist area where the hidden desires are offered to the world as transparent. Predictably, he cannot get sexually aroused with Marianne, not enough to perform a sexual act because, in his sexual economy, Marianne represents an emotion-laden object. This scene is counterbalanced with his wild sex with a prostitute in the same room which happens

against a glass window, where the city and the surroundings can see the prostitute and her client. This scene is an imitation of the sex scene which Brandon has seen earlier, one night, in the neighbouring building. The concept of copying the already seen is crucial because all of Brandon's fantasies are actually second-hand imitations, sexual copycats. Apart from the mentioned scene, such imitations are group sex, the visit to the gay sex club, sexual intercourse on the parking lot with a girl from the night club, copies of the different pornographic narratives which Brandon tends to make real, to infuse with reality so that the line dividing fantasy and reality becomes for Brandon extremely porous and fragile as hardcore sexual fantasies refuse to deliver in reality what they purport to be in fantasy.

When his boss tells him that his office computer has probably been hacked because it is full of pornographic material, he comes to that conclusion on the basis of "exotic" categories of the pornographic material, which he cannot relate to his employee, by which we can assume that Brandon prefers violent and exotic pornography. At the same time, virtual reality with its cyber identities and anonymity offers sexuality devoid of feeling and intimacy, a one-sided sexual encounter. There are two mutually exclusive dimensions of Brandon's life: public life and hidden life, which is so hidden that no one is aware of his addiction, which means that no one can help him, which is of secondary importance as Brandon does not think he needs help – he is irreparably structured as an addict.<sup>[10]</sup>

The estrangement from his sister culminates right before her suicide attempt, when he confronts her aggressively because of the affair with his married boss, and Brandon is not concerned about his sister's well-being but rather about the fact that his sister, prone to emotional attachment after a few casual sexual encounters, may jeopardize his position vis-à-vis his superior. In the verbal exchange he accuses her of being immature and irresponsible towards herself and others, calling her a burden because she needs to be taken care of, which compromises his independence and aloofness. Furthermore, by pointing out his "superiority," he singles out his orderly life, by which he means his well-paid corporate job and his estate. His job in corporate culture enhances competitiveness, incessant antagonisms, and strategies of outplaying the rivals. Such an aggressive approach is equaled in his "private" behavior, intense and sexually aggressive: persuade, conquer, consume, and discard, the same pattern which is followed with a different prey.

The other advantage over his sister is his apartment – his estate which, other than being a status symbol, reflects his interiority, which is as sterile as is the apartment: black, white, and grey colors, minimalistically but fashionably and trendily designed, with the perception of the spectator that in Brandon's case "less definitely isn't more."

Shame enacts sexual addiction as the metaphor or metonymy of the human condition in the culture of intensity. Sex is reduced to compulsion, yet it is devoid of any pleasure. The repetition compulsion reveals the impossibility of fulfillment, yet it also maintains and guarantees the functionality of the protagonist. In Freudian era the unconscious and its first definition – repressed sexuality – had its liberating potential as it rebelled against the excessive repression, restrictions, and frustrations which the Freudian era placed upon humans. Once in the countercultural sixties the interdictions were subverted and played down, the unconscious in the form of unbridled sexuality liberated from interdictions just revealed, as Lacan argues, that the disappearance of prohibitions opened up the way for the impossibility of satisfaction if that satisfaction was not mediated by desire. Otherwise, it just leaves the vacated space for compulsion, which is almost a parody of the unconscious, or its reverse: emptiness pure and simple rather than any sort of fulfillment, the emptiness which is experienced together with the inward and desperate cry for intimacy.

## 6. Conclusion

The circuitous path of intensity has been traced in this analysis as initiating in the countercultural sixties and reaching its malevolent apogee in contemporaneity, as intensity writ large, yet marked by an unknown ratio between life and death. Some questions, if not all, are left unanswered, such as: "How much death is inscribed in life itself?". The answers to this question range from the glorification of life forces to the glorification of the death drive as the confirmation of life. Yet, when life becomes palpable only in terms of surviving death, which is not a general human condition but a daily routine, then we seem to have reached the psychological cul-de-sac. Once the (counter)culture has defined the state of being alive as the permanent condition of challenging the borders, the cultural discourse on moderation seems to have been forever lost. At this point we feel that there is no cultural language for moderation, or, rather, such language is available and

appropriate only for those who have survived or have had a near-death experience while, supposedly, those who have not had one were never truly and authentically alive. There is no possibility of returning to the pre-countercultural ethos but only the possibility, so it seems, of experiencing the second birth. The first life is given to us by chance; the second life is the way we engender ourselves in post-ecstatic moderation. That is, if we have survived.

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[1] The overlapping of the personal and the political, and the difference between the New Left's politics and countercultural demands is given in Doug Rossinow's "The Revolution Is about Our Lives': The New Left's Counterculture" (2001).

[2] The two main figures of the psychedelic culture were certainly Timothy Leary, a Harvard psychology professor, and Ken Kesey, the author of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Leary's League for Spiritual Discovery even had its ethical code of drugs related to mystical religious experiences, and LSD was hailed as the drug which would lead to psychological revolution, whereby LSD was not "just another recreational intoxicant but a psychedelic sacrament that would lead individuals to higher conscience" (Farber 23). The second figure was Ken Kesey with his Merry Pranksters, who had more relaxed ethical attitudes, proven by their acid parties which included acid tests where the guests were given drugs without knowing it, in punch bowls.

[3] The song by Huey Lewis and the News, "It's hip to be square," as the leading musical motive of *The American Psycho* (2000), directed by Mary Harron, is a well-placed cynical comment of the path leading from the hippies to the yuppies. Also, Patrick Bateman and the protagonist of *Shame* have more in common than meets the eye.

[4] The iconic psychedelic song "White Rabbit" by Jefferson Airplane, which relies heavily on the motives from Alice's *Adventures in Wonderland*, is often quoted for its closing line: "Feed your head" (with mushrooms), but rarely for its opening lines, which corroborate Farber's thesis: "One pill makes you larger and one pill makes you small, and the ones your mother gives you don't do anything at all." This psychedelic anthem may be interpreted as the revolt of the countercultural generation against the parental generation, expressed in the refusal: "Your pills are useless, our drugs are much better!"

[5] Freud used the term 'the death drive' (translated into English by James Strachey as the death instinct). Thanatos was introduced into psychoanalysis by Federn.

[6] As the critique of Garcia's rather far-fetched work is beyond the scope of this article, we will just mention the well-known Lacanian idea of mechanismism and of the mechanistic paradigm which we live, also brilliantly explained throughout his work in relation to the human psyche, which can also be brought into relation with the fetishistic strategies of evading life.

[7] As Walter T. Anderson observes: "Esalen put together pieces that had not been put together before and introduced them to a new and growing public. In so doing it created a subculture. This was not precisely Theodore Roszak's counterculture. Although it was close. It was more therapeutic, less political" (209).

[8] Personal translation of Lacroix's article published in *Evropski glasnik*, 2002.

[9] The Rolling Stones' appearance in Altamont in 1969 is often interpreted as the symbolic end of the 1960s' counterculture, with the members of the Hells Angels motorcycle club having been asked to surround the stage to provide security, which resulted in the death of a young African-American boy. When the 'peace and love' message of the 1960s was transformed into an outward aggression – the counterculture was officially over.

[10] This 'homo duplex' position, or splitting, is similar to the way no character in Ellis's novel *The American Psycho* knew anything about Bateman's alleged killing spree.



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