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Blockchain and Web3: Mirrors, “Jouissance” and Social & Personal Identity Formation

Abstract

This paper argues that the concept of “jouissance” can help us understand the popularity of blockchain protocols, meme coins, and NFTs in the world of Web3. These technologies act as mirrors to project reflections that allow people to imagine social and personal selves differently. Meme-coins use dark humor to oppose mainstream society, and the popularity of NFTs cannot be fully explained by artistic merit or return on investment. Instead, each collectible NFT allows the collector to explore various possible representations of the self. It is argued that blockchains must be seen as socio-informational-technical systems that participate in the formation of the symbolic social structures giving rise to social and personal identity. By recognizing the personal and social significance of jouissance, we can appreciate the darker, more primal aspects of these phenomena that other theories and approaches cannot fully explain.

When I was growing up in Southern Ontario, Canada, travelling carnivals would visit small towns across the province throughout the summer. This included the town in which my grandmother lived, and with whom I would customarily stay for a time during the summer months. The carnivals were a great source of delight for me during these visits. There were rollercoasters with blaring music that whizzed me around in circles until I was dizzy and, truth be told, a bit queasy. There were Ferris wheels manned by mysterious (at least to me) and possibly dangerous (at least to my grandmother) “carnies”, who travelled with the fun fair to assemble and dismantle the rides and collect tickets from those making their circumnavigational journey around the wheel. There were shooting games with large, dusty teddy bear prizes (never won). But most intriguing of all of the carnival offerings was the “fun house” where I could wander through a maze of mirrors, each one designed to present me with a slightly different, distorted, image of myself. In the hall of mirrors, I would gaze in fascination

first at a reflection of myself as a two-foot by two-foot (or half-metre by half-metre, if you prefer) dwarf, then another where I had been transformed into a tall, skinny giant, and another where I morphed into a Picasso-esque squiggly line. Due to the careful positioning of the mirrors, these simultaneously familiar, yet strange reformulations of the physical “me” seemingly went on to infinity.

While the fun house was “fun,” there was always something inexplicably unsettling about it as well. Why should a hall of mirrors be so horrifyingly thrilling? After all, I knew that the mirrors did not project back the “real” me or that I would not be permanently transfigured into a dwarf, a giant or a squiggly line. Nor was I likely to be trapped in the infinity of the mirrors forever. It was only years later, on reading about Julia Kristeva’s Lacanian-inspired concept of “jouissance,” that I began to understand what I might have been feeling and experiencing (Kristeva, 1982). Jouissance is a French term meaning “enjoyment” with sensual overtones, but in Kristeva’s Lacanian-inspired interpretation of the term, it also takes on the mantle of a perverse and piquant delight experienced through the process of abjection, or casting down and being separated from the norms of the self and society.¹ It is in this carnival memory of my youth that I find a path to deeper understanding of today’s explosion of blockchain protocols, especially the “meme coins” and endless NFTs in the world of Web3. I argue that these can be seen as mirrors designed to project reflections that allow us to imagine social and personal “selves” differently.

To access this deeper appreciation of blockchains and Web3, it is necessary to abandon any notion of them as mere technical artefacts. Instead, the path to understanding must be followed by reformulating blockchains and Web3 as socio-informational-technical systems that participate in the formation of the symbolic social structures that give rise to social and personal identity (i.e., identity in the Lacanian

senseⁱⁱ) shaping human social relations and consciousness. A simple technical view of blockchains fails to fully account for what early innovators of the technology sought to achieve with them (i.e., Nakamoto wrote about generating greater social trust through disintermediating the banks) and the popularity of the technology as a social phenomenon. Instead, it is more fruitful to view blockchains as expressions of the complex network of relations (in the Latourian sense) that gives rise to our social “life world” and our personal place in this world (Husserl, 1970/1954). John Searle’s “speech act” theory (1985) introduces the notion that speech, including speech that is captured in the form of text, is capable of performing declarative acts that summon a society into existence. Through successive speech acts, a culture intersubjectively constructs and reproduces its life-world (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The work of library scientist and document theorist Jesse Shera — who, with his colleague Margaret Egan, first introduced the field of “social epistemology” — argued that text forms ‘the basic bonds through which individuals achieve unity in a culture’ and that “[a] culture, almost by definition produces a ‘transcript,’ a record in more or less permanent form that can be transmitted from generation to generation” (cited in Martinez-Ávila and Zandonade). So, it is by means of what can, in some cases, materialize as a shared ledger, if we accept Searle’s and Shera’s ideas, that a society takes shape and expresses its unique cultural identity and that we find our personal place within the broader culture. From this perspective, all societies are socio-informational-technical ecosystems constituted of, and by, social actors, communications, and technologies — such as blockchains — of cognition and communication that enable the creation and continuation of the identity of individual and social groups over time and space.

Kristeva (1982) argues that the connection between the anthropological, or the social, and the psychological, or the subjective, follow the same logic. Taking this line, I

suggest that we can draw upon Kristeva's Lacanian-inspired theories of identity formation to gaze into the mirror of processes of personal and social identity formation as these are configured through blockchains in the same playful spirit as the fun house carnival game. This line of thought connects blockchain-based social and personal identity formation to Kristeva's notion of *jouissance*.

I have written about blockchains as reflections of our social selves drawing upon Taylor's notion of utopian imaginaries (Lemieux, 2022; Taylor 2020; see also Dylan-Ennis, this volume). For example, the original blockchain – Bitcoin – sought to redress the broken trust perpetrated by financial institutions through rendering the banks obsolete. Subsequent protocols have sought to make improvements to the originary Bitcoin model not only to provide additional technical capabilities, as in Ethereum's smart contracts, but to create a better social future. In Taylor's writings, imaginaries help us reach a desirable future state, to explore different standards to steer by through experimentation with new sorts of imagined communities (Taylor, 2020, pp 23-24). In this sense, blockchain protocols take on the form of a social wish (Lemieux, 2022, p.201). The intention of the utopian social imaginary, then, is to break away from, or cast down, the usual social norms and rules in order to create a prefigurative image of a preferable or desirable society, an image that is able to transform society as it exists now in order to exchange it for a better future. It may or may not achieve this positive social transformation, as many critics of utopianism observe; nevertheless, that is its intention.

This idea is well exemplified by the iconography of pink-haired unicorns and rainbows associated with Ethereum Classic, visual metaphors expressing a collective hope (Cuen, 2020). Dancing is also an expression of the utopian wish within the Ethereum community:

The dance is a promise “until next year,” the leaders say on stage. It’s a celebration of what the community has achieved so far and what it will achieve. The dance is a way to communicate with Ethereans from all around the world . . . (Cuen, 2020).

To some, the dancing expresses Ethereum’s cultural values related to “freedom, creative expression, fun, unconventionality, and even the desire for collective unity” around a vision that is bigger than any one individual (Cuen, 2020).ⁱⁱⁱ

Blockchain-based meme-coins and cartoonish NFTs are not meant as Taylor-esque utopian imaginaries like Ethereum unicorns and rainbows, however. Though it would be oversimplifying to draw sharp distinctions, meme-coin and NFT imaginaries occupy a social place more along the lines of the hall of mirrors of my youth or, even more so, the “Dutty Mas” of Jamaican and other Caribbean carnivals. In the Jamaican Carnival tradition, Dutty Mas takes place the night before “Pretty Mas”, the daylight, brighter and “cleaner” version of carnival. Pretty Mas embraces the desirable allure of glitter, colour and light embodied in the elaborate feathered costumes worn by “band” members (Sheriff, 2014). Dutty Mas, on the other hand, sometimes called J’Ouvert (jour ouvert) or Bacchanal, hints at a darker, more sensual, kind of carnival. In both forms of mas, the usual social norms and rules are dispensed with, but in Dutty Mas celebrants cover themselves with mud, oil and brightly coloured splashes of powder or paint (literally getting dirty, or in Jamaican patois, “dutty”) and dance in the streets from darkness until dawn. Dutty Mas is the epitome of Kristeva’s notion of the spirit of jouissance.

To elaborate, according to Lacan (2014), the psyche, or human consciousness formation, can be divided into three major perspectives, which correlate roughly to the three main moments in the individual's development. The first of these is the Imagery

perspective/moment, which is the start of ego formation wherein subjects became distinct from objects (the process of objectification). It is at this moment that an infant is able to recognise itself in a mirror, or other symbolically reflective device, and perceives itself as an object outside of itself – it becomes objectified.^{iv} Once a child begins to recognize that its body is separate from the world and its mother, it begins to feel anxiety, which is caused by a sense of lost unity (Dino, n.d.). Kristeva (1982, p. 13) gives a social example of the process in describing the way that some “primitive” societies use ritual to demarcate the boundary between the society and the threatening world of animals and animalism. In both the case of the human and society, this moment is crucial for entry into the Symbolic order or moment, which requires that the individual understand itself as separate from others.

Now once the separation of subject and object has taken place, and the sense of loss and anxiety and the Symbolic (i.e., the world of language, rules, norms and institutions) becomes known, desire for reunification with the self and the mother begins. This moment opens up the space of abjection. Kristeva describes this space as follows:

*. . . there is nothing either objective or objectal to the abject. It is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become alter ego, drops so that "I" does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence. Hence a **jouissance** [emphasis added] in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 9).*

and

The sense of abjection that I experience is anchored in the superego. The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 15).

In this way, abjection, and the experience of jouissance that it engenders, is a way of dealing with the pain of separation from our selves (i.e., the ideal state of pre-linguistic nature from which we have been separated at birth and to which we can never return). In the debasement of ourselves and casting aside of the normal rules of self and society, what is reflected back to us in the mirror (symbolic or otherwise) is not something we desire (even as we still desire a return to our ideal state). As a result, we can take perverse and cathartic pleasure in both perceiving ourselves as separate in this distorted form and using the revulsion it creates in us to sublimate our eternal and unquenchable desire to merge with the Other in order to re-unify ourselves.

Unlike Pretty Mas or Taylor's utopian imaginary, then, Dutty Mas (and the carnival fun house as well) do not invoke imagery of attraction or aspiration, but rather imagery of abjection (to use Kristeva's term). Moreover, the goal of celebrants of Dutty Mas and those entering the fun house carnival hall of mirrors is not adoption of the image, but to experience a perverse enjoyment in participating in the effects of the image and, through simultaneous revulsion with, and attraction to, the image, coupled with knowledge of the transience of the experience, to achieve catharsis. Kristeva accounts for the experience in this way:

A big fire at night always produces an exciting and exhilarating effect; this explains the attraction of fireworks; but in the case of fireworks, the graceful and regular shape of the flames and the complete immunity from danger produce a light and playful effect comparable to the effect of a glass of champagne. A real fire is quite another matter: there the horror and a certain sense of personal danger, combined with the well-known exhilarating effect of a fire at night, produce in the spectator (not, of course, in one whose house has burnt down) a certain shock to the brain and, as it were, a challenge to his own destructive instincts, which, alas, lie buried in the soul of even the meekest and most domesticated official of the lowest grade. This grim sensation is almost

always delightful. I really don't know if it is possible to watch a fire without some enjoyment (Kristeva, 1982, p. 16).

This acknowledgement of a darker, more primal, form of social imaginary associated with blockchain meme-coins and NFTs does not reject the brighter, lighter notion of utopian imaginaries. As Caribbean carnival traditions teach us, both co-exist. However, they serve different purposes.

Through the use of dark humour, meme-coins, for example, exist in opposition to more mainstream coins, and more mainstream society, just as the Dutty Mas exists within Caribbean Carnival culture as a Bacchanalian parody of Pretty Mas, which in turn arose in opposition to the post-Lent balls and masquerades of colonial occupiers as a way of drawing attention to hypocrisy, greed or the mean-spiritedness of these celebrations. Similarly, in the form of abject and perversely comic depictions of crypto culture, meme-coins use parody as a fun hall mirror reflection of what is to be rejected the better to highlight the ideal. In doing so, such parody brings about a carthartic jouissance.

Dogecoin is the standard-bearer for such meme-coin jouissance. Founded by Jackson Palmer^v and Billy Markus in 2013, it is represented by the ridiculous image of a Shiba Inu dog, and “has combined a serious devotion to the decentralized idea of cryptocurrencies with utter refusal to take themselves seriously” (Floyd, 2018). Dogecon 2018, an “un-conference” held in Vancouver, Canada that I attended, bore all the trappings of jouissance characteristic of a Dutty Mas: weird costumes, games, drops of free coins, and partying through the night (Kertonegoro, 2018).

In a similar vein to Dogecoin, Pied Piper Coin (PPL) began as parody based upon the HBO sitcom *Silicon Valley* in order to use “humor [symbolic abjection] to help remind the cryptosphere of all the shady things that have occurred and to help the broader community avoid these mistakes. [...] People need to learn their history before

they can progress into the future. Our way of teaching is through humor” (Floyd, 2018). PPL holds up a mirror that both repulses through highlighting the lost ideal and attracts, through the use of parody, in such a way as to render the repulsive safe.

Jouissance also helps explain the popularity of NFTs, the demand for which cannot be fully accounted for by either artistic merit or return on investment. In Lacanian theory, the power of the image is not due to any intrinsic quality but to the place which it occupies in a symbolic structure (“Fantasy,” n.d.). In relation to jouissance and identity formation, the succession of AI-generated NFT artworks is personal. Each collectable NFT is a slight variation on a theme like the mirrors in the carnival fun hall – a variant Krypto Kitty, Bored Ape, Peace Punk, Woman Warrior, or what have you. The collector is able to ask, “does this image reflect me?”, to explore various possible representations of the self, and acquire the image that best expresses a playful fantasy version. This phenomenon is exemplified by the use of NFTs as profile pictures for X (Twitter) users. “Introducing NFT profile pictures,” an X (Twitter) marketing campaign announces, “ownership is stored on a blockchain . . . NFT profile pictures are displayed in a special hexagonal shape . . .” The collector knows that the image is impossible or improbable. It is not an image to be aspired to or achieved; rather, it is one that frees the collector to mentally experiment with versions of their identity that are outside of the embeddedness of their usual existence in a personal or social sense – somewhat like a sexual fantasy would be. And, because there is something abject in the image – who would want to look like a Bored Ape? – the image provides carthartic access to the comfort of knowing “this is not really me.” This instantiates the collector’s particular mode of jouissance in that it enables the collector to project onto the NFT (the Other) an impossible desire that they cannot experience (i.e., a fantasy), while at the same time using the possession and ownership of the NFT

to compensate for a sense of lack. As such, the fantasy image of the NFT represents an escape from the dissatisfaction created by a disunity of self and the demands of social reality (i.e., the Symbolic order). NFTs therefore can be considered the natural foil to the utopian imaginaries of more mainstream blockchain protocols or the comic darkness of meme-coins in that they provide personal jouissant comfort as a salve for the sense of lack or anxiety-producing loss experienced as part of human consciousness and social existence.

Consideration of blockchain and Web3 phenomena through the lens of jouissance provides a distinct image, like those of the fun-house carnival hall of mirrors, through which to gaze and playfully consider the personal and social meaning and identity of these phenomena. There are, of course, many other mirrors to be discovered in the blockchain and Web3 fun house – as the other contributions to this unique publishing experiment will attest to - but jouissance is a concept that helps account for the fascination and popularity of certain aspects of blockchains, Web3 and crypto culture that other theories and approaches cannot fully. In uncovering and exploring blockchain and Web3 through the lens of jouissance, it is possible to appreciate the need for a Dutty Mas version of the crypto carnival, offering a darker, more primal, explanation of this world than the Pretty Mas of Taylorian or technical utopianism.

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ⁱ The Collins-Robert French Dictionary Complete & Unabridged defines *jouissance* as follows:

“pleasure, enjoyment, delight (sensuelle), sensual pleasure, orgasm, climax.” “*Jouissance*,” *Harper-Collins French Dictionary Complete & Unabridged*, 7th Ed (New York: Harper-Collins, 2005).

ⁱⁱ The other two perspectives or moments are: the Symbolic perspective/moment, which is the world of language, rules, norms and institutions - symbolically, the Father and the Real perspective/moment, which is the ideal state of pre-linguistic nature from which we have been separated from birth. These are not necessarily conceived of by Lacan as temporally distinct or linear perspectives or moments; an individual can oscillate among, and wrestles with, them throughout life. See, Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, *Jacques Lacan and the philosophy of psychoanalysis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

ⁱⁱⁱ Anthropologist Ann Brody cited in Leigh Cuen. The following video encapsulates the circa 2018 philosophy of the protocol, a mix of dedication to practical work (i.e., “BUIDL”) and utopian ideals: <https://youtu.be/xC8DrG5KSLU>. For an example of the dancing, see: <https://youtu.be/kUheuFDHSvI>.

^{iv} Jacques Lacan writes in “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” delivered at the 16th International Congress of Psychoanalysis, Zurich, July 17, 1949 that “We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image - whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*.” (Lacan, 2014).

^v Recently, Palmer, who left Dogecoin in 2015, abandoned the parody of the meme-coin to express his revulsion with the current “mirror image” of crypto more directly: “After years of studying it, I believe that cryptocurrency is an inherently right-wing, hyper-capitalistic technology built primarily to amplify the wealth of its proponents through a combination of

tax avoidance, diminished regulatory oversight and artificially enforced scarcity” [Jackson Palmer Tweet, July 14, 2021,

<https://twitter.com/ummjackson/status/1415353985406406658?s=46&t=h2XsfTibFT5xPgFY5cENTg>].