

IMPLOSIVE SOCIETIES: SCREENS, MATTER, AND LATERAL AGENCY

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Abstract. What we have been facing over the past decades may be described not in the worn-out terms of yet another ‘turn’ but rather as a fundamental change of vector: from outward-directed expansion to inward-directed compression – or, more precisely, to *productive differentiation*. This shift represents a dialectical reversal within expansionist dynamics themselves, encompassing both human experiences and material milieus and tending to merge them into a new kind of concretion with distinct characteristics.

Among these characteristics are the intensified presence of screen-like surfaces that predominantly surround us; the laterality of experiences, which are increasingly susceptible to distributed or dispersed forms of presence as opposed to aggressivity-laden frontal (re)actions; and a form of meaningfulness that resists accommodation within symbolic structures. Taken together, these tendencies mark a broader transformation in material-social dynamics – one that paradoxically accelerates the imaginative realm, now situated beyond the long-standing divide between inner and outer worlds.

Such an imaginatively accelerated society may be described as *implosive* – a term I use in a sense close to that found in the programmatic work of Marshall McLuhan. In this context, implosion is understood as a productive process of technological and perceptual differentiation, involving the composition and decomposition of matter and resulting in the

blurring of established boundaries between the given, the meaningful, and the perceptible. In this article, I examine the origins, underlying conditions, and political as well as social-theoretical implications of the emergent *implosive societal*.

Keywords: intensive matter, imaginal acceleration, implosive societal, post-activist agency, laterality.

“Our speed-up today is not a slow explosion outward from center to margins but an instant implosion and an interfusion of space and functions.” (McLuhan 1994)

Introduction: A World Folded in on Itself (Social Implosion as Both a Developmental Tendency and a Hope)

Let me begin with a brief disclaimer. I am not entirely certain that I will be able to maintain a consistent focus on the dominant vector of my reflections, as suggested by the article’s title. This potential inconsistency stems, in part, from the ‘multimodality’ of the vector itself, which does not adhere to a purely spatial trajectory but instead encompasses a complex interplay of heterogeneous events and processes. For instance, this vector might tentatively be described using a series of predicates: centripetal, inward-oriented, differential, enveloping, intensive, inconspicuous, incalculable, and ultimately, implosive. Moreover – and perhaps more significantly – the ambiguities may stem from the inherent erraticism of the subject itself, which, in turn, derives from the distinct spatiotemporal characteristics of the broader field I am attempting to engage with. Therefore, it seems appropriate to begin with a brief outline of the field’s main features and its genesis.

As for its genesis, it emerges at the intersection of two mutually reinforcing processes: on the one hand, the culturalization of the social world – including its material infrastructures and substrates – and on the other, the planarization – and, in this sense, the materialization – of the cultural sphere. Together, these processes give rise to a formation whose contours align neither with what we traditionally conceive of as the social nor with the broader, more capacious, and even universal notion of the world. I would describe what emerges through these processes as a world folded in on itself.¹ In a sense, this ‘aggregate state’

1 Laura Marks, in her most recent book project, presents a sort of practical philosophy rooted in the metaphysics of ‘enfoldness’ (Marks 2024).

of the world arises from a kind of dialectical process in which the relatively prolonged expansion, or explosion, of human capacities — intellectual, technological, and, above all, imaginative — transforms into its opposite while remaining on the same developmental trajectory: an intensive, inward-oriented compression that can only be partially captured in spatial terms. This compression brings about qualitative shifts across many, if not all, dimensions of our worldly experience.

The most conspicuous — and far-reaching — of these shifts occur in the sphere of our material-technological surroundings. Today, we inhabit a materially saturated world whose density increasingly blurs the traditional distinction between the given and the meaningful. As a result, the material world around us no longer leads us ‘outside’; it no longer offers an initial impulse, direction, or trajectory for our thoughts and actions. It is no longer as transparent as it once was. Rather than frontally ‘penetrating’ toward its meaning or (hidden) function, we now find ourselves sliding laterally along surface ecologies into which individual ‘things’ are increasingly pressed.

Nevertheless, these surface ecologies are not merely extensive, as one might expect of any surface, but rather intensive — or generative — tending toward incessant differentiation, or more precisely, implosion. Consider, for instance, a screen or a screen-like surface. When we look at a painting — which is itself a screen-like object — we become engaged in a dynamic space that emerges from a ‘metabolic’ process, one that transforms the material components of the picture — frame, canvas, and paint — into something that transcends the familiar distinction between the given and the meaningful. We do not merely identify something placed before us; rather, we navigate a space that exists both outside and within us. In doing so, we move, touch, feel, and understand simultaneously — metabolizing everything we ‘encounter’ into a new composition that did not exist a moment earlier. Today, most of the surfaces that surround us — this is my thesis — are screen-like, thereby provoking and disseminating the very processes of metabolic, implosive differentiation described above.²

Generative material surfaces — epitomized by the screen — also fulfill a secondary role, corresponding to an alternative meaning of the word *screen*: not as a surface for projection or representation, but as a veil whose primary function is not to reveal, but to conceal.

- 2 ‘Screen-like,’ in our context, refers to a surface that is structurally — or even ontologically — organized like pictorial space, in which elements relate to one another not extensively but intensively. One consequence of this trait is that a pictorial (sur)face — unlike a physical one — cannot be segmented. This means, among other things, that a screen-like (sur)face is fundamentally undetermined: no demarcating line can be drawn on it or through it.

Paradoxically, the two functions of generative surfaces — revealing and concealing — are not opposites, but rather two facets of the same process. While their interrelation may manifest in various ways, a common denominator persists: each such surface initiates a vortex of material-perceptual involution — a kind of mutual enfolding of matter and perception. In contrast to the centrifugal vector characteristic of the modern experiential stance — outward-looking, unidirectional, frontal, paradigmatically activist, and transgressive — a centripetal orientation is increasingly coming to the fore. This stance is defined by opposing qualities: it is inward-looking, multi-directional, lateral, situated beyond the active/passive dichotomy, and non-transitive — deeply entangled with its medium and elemental relations. For instance, our experiences in cinemas or museums are typically multi-directional.³ They do not fully detach from everyday space, as Romantic aesthetics might suggest, nor are they entirely immersed in the diegetic worlds of film or artwork. Instead, they traverse ontological dimensions and boundaries. While this may sound exceptional, such crossings occur subtly — as a vortex of micro-processes comparable to those within the body, such as metabolism, that sustain life while remaining largely unnoticed.⁴ We glide from one (artistic or pictorial) object to another — or, more precisely, from surface to surface — remaining within the same ecology while simultaneously tracing multiple lines and tendencies that diverge and radiate within and beneath those surfaces. A subtle sense of boredom, or even indifference, often accompanies this experience, signalling a shift away from symbolic content toward the specific aggregate state of the environment in which we find ourselves. A film or artwork may still command our attention, but in doing so, it diverts that attention away from symbolic content — which, in principle, could be disentangled from its material medium. Instead, attention becomes inflected and interwoven with a multitude of heterogeneous elements: fragments of matter, sedimented events, habitual postures, and distant echoes of thoughts that once haunted us. In such moments, the diegetic unexpectedly turns metabolic, and symbolic expression implodes into a dispersive force — scattering and transforming both established configurations and material substances. Moreover, these ‘subterranean’ currents, events, and tendencies are neither linear nor developmental, but aleatory, cumulative,

3 See, for example, the longitude project by Laura Harris, dedicated to the semantic functions of gallery windows (Harris 2021).

4 I borrow the notion of the metabolic as a perceptual regime characteristic of contemporary ‘cultural contents’ from Shane Denson, who employs this term in the context of his discussion of post-cinematic imagery (Denson 2020).

and reversible — further contributing to a mode of meaning-making that exceeds the symbolic and characterizes what I propose to call the ‘implosive societal.’

The term *implosive society*, or *implosive societal*, serves both descriptive and normative functions, though not in equal measure: the projective — and thus normative — dimension tends to outweigh the descriptive one. It is worth noting, however, that this projection has a peculiar nature. It is not primarily tied to the free flight of fantasy or to something abstract and subjective. On the contrary, this ‘projective normative’ is existentially motivated, historically grounded, materially conditioned, and, in this sense, involuntary. It is even non-theoretical, as societal implosiveness appears to me as the only viable chance for the endurance of humankind in the foreseeable future. In this sense, it both already exists and remains something yet to come — evoking a structure of hope (DeNora 2021).

In the remainder of the article, I will explore the origins, underlying conditions, and political as well as social-theoretical implications of the emergent implosive societal.

Meeting the Symbolic Halfway⁵

The emerging predominance of implosive (or intensive) tendencies over explosive (extensive) ones is most evident in the shifting role of the symbolic, understood broadly as figuration — both as process and result. This implies, among other things, that a ‘figure’ refers to anything that can be separated from its material substance and considered — at least in some sense — independently of that substance, or more precisely, of its specific embodiment. For instance, a piece of information can be easily paraphrased, or a product redesigned and reproduced. While a figure retains a connection to its material substance, this connection is, to some extent, arbitrary and, by extension, subordinate to the figure. One of the defining traits of (high) modernity is arguably the initiation of a transnational process — beginning in the 15th century — that distills the cultural into a socially and ontologically semi-autonomous realm. As a result, ‘culture’ emerges as the predominant domain of the symbolic — one that, while not fully coinciding with the meaningful, nonetheless incessantly strives to assimilate it, and where the symbolic resides in its purest and most potent manifestations. It is the expressive and cumulative character of this model of culture that

5 This subtitle rephrases the title of Karen Barad’s book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Barad 2007).

renders it extensive and, consequently, explosive. But what might an alternative — an intensive — model look like? We can begin to glimpse it in the work of Raymond Williams.⁶

Raymond Williams' Notion of Culture: from Repository to Aggregate State

Williams was among the first to propose and articulate a dynamic concept of culture — one that places far greater emphasis on the performative rather than the productive dimensions of cultural life, where 'productive' refers to the predominance of cultural products.⁷ For Williams, culture is, above all, a human activity that cannot be fully encapsulated by any of its products, whether texts, music, or films. As he himself noted, 'No mode of production, and therefore no dominant social order, and therefore no dominant culture, ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention (Williams 1977: 128).

On a methodological level, this perspective calls for a sustained effort to resist the 'immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products' (Williams 1977: 128). In other words, we must slow the pace of analytical work to make room for engagement with the primary forms of culture that Williams identifies as 'residual' and 'emergent' (Williams 1977: 122–123). However, even more significant than Williams's dynamic notion of culture are his ontological — or topological — considerations, presented in the same 1977 volume, *Marxism and Literature*. These reflections, occupying just over a page, hold profound implications.

Williams introduces a distinction between culture as a precipitate and culture as a form of solution or suspension. The former refers to symbolic formations; the latter corresponds to what he describes as a semantic 'pre-formation' or 'structure of feeling.' This structure of feeling is always in the process of moving toward symbolic articulation, yet it is never fully subsumed by any stable symbolic form. Though pre-symbolic, it is not pre-semantic — on the contrary, it is inherently meaningful. Crucially, this meaningfulness does not arise from any direct assignment or deliberate production of meaning. Rather, it is an emergent property of a milieu — a transformation of its aggregate state.

6 In his 2010 book, Scott Lash introduced the term 'intensive culture,' linking it to processes of differentiation (Lash 2010).

7 John Dewey similarly proposed the notion of art as an integral part of the self-articulation processes of everyday life (Dewey 1980).

This meaningfulness has only reached its full potential in recent times. Today, any figurative or symbolic entity — whether rooted in so-called classical or contemporary culture — tends to dissolve into the performative, or at least gravitates in that direction. Culture is no longer a collection of significant entities but rather an aggregate state of our culturalized milieus — milieus that generate significance as such, epitomized in the notion of a life worth living.

In contrast to earlier periods, the notion of culture is increasingly decoupled from that of tradition. The cultural sphere is no longer anchored in a stable repository of canonical artefacts, texts, and images institutionally or imaginatively maintained and policed. Instead, culture is undergoing a metamorphosis into a dense and heterogeneous ecology — circulating predominantly in the form of imprints, trails, reverberations, echoes, overlaps, and similar modes of transmission. This shift from sediment to solution, and from meaning to ‘quantum’ — a tendency characteristic of contemporary cultural dynamics (a topic to which I will return below) — marks a point at which our consideration of the cultural roots of the implosive societal moves beyond Williams. While Williams construes ‘solution’ as a ‘social semantic formation’ — one among many — thus confining its constitutive factors and generative potential to the realm of psychology and human practice, I argue for a radical expansion of this ‘region’ toward a new developmental vector that draws both human and non-human entities into its transformational vortex. Importantly, the emergence of this transformational vector is driven not by moral principles or psychological impulses, but by the inexorable logic of economic-technological development and socio-historical modernization — along with their sinister and irreversible consequences.

Planarization of Culture/Culturalization of Matter

I would now like to briefly discuss the complex and multifaceted relationships between culture and matter that characterize late modernity in its current phase. I will begin by introducing an important distinction between two complementary — and, to some extent, parallel — processes that I refer to as the planarization of culture and the culturalization of matter. The distinction between planarization and culturalization is admittedly somewhat vague and provisional in this context, as the culturalization of matter is structurally tied to the pivotal role played by the proliferation of materially diverse, textured surfaces in both the modern economy and cultural experience. Put

differently, planarization highlights a key dimension of what I mean by culturalization.

As a contemporary social-theoretical concept, *culturalization* was recently introduced in the work of Andreas Reckwitz. However, as a broader theoretical framework and object of systematic sociological inquiry, the notion can be traced back to Jeffrey Alexander's project of cultural sociology (Alexander 2003) and even further to the foundational work of Georg Simmel (Frisby 1997).

As Reckwitz explains, culturalization refers to “a structural shift in which the specific patterns and rules of the cultural field — essentially the arts — are expanding into society at large” (Reckwitz 2018: 140). More generally — and this is quite telling — Reckwitz tends to equate culturalization with processes of aestheticization and the latter with the proliferation of artistic social attitudes and practices. He identifies three ‘aestheticization shifts,’ or ‘formations,’ in the genesis of modernity: (1) bourgeois society / aesthetic countercultures / exclusive aestheticization; (2) mass society / media and consumption cultures / inclusive aestheticization; and (3) late modernity / cultural capitalism / aesthetic activation (Reckwitz 2016: 230–240).

I agree with the classification proposed by Reckwitz and the developmental logic that underpins it. However, I would like to probe further by considering this tripartite periodization not merely as a series of changes in social attitudes and practices, but as a continuum of transformations in the very notion of the cultural itself. These transformations can be understood as shifts in its ‘aggregate states,’ involving substantial — and, in this sense, material — changes. I propose distinguishing three such aggregate states, which — ideal-typically — correspond to three major periods in the history of modernity since the late 18th century:

1. Aristocratic/Bourgeois Culture (18th–19th centuries): culture as a **field**.

2. Mass Culture of the Industrial Era (late 19th century–1970s): culture as social **practice**.

3. Post-Industrial/Late Modern Culture (1980s to present): culture as environment, atmosphere, elemental composition, and **envelope**.

Arguably, the final aggregate state — or current historical phase — remains the least defined, due in part to its sheer immediacy. More significantly, however, this indeterminacy arises from a fundamental shift in the overarching vector: from continuous expansion to ungovernable differentiation — or, put differently, from explosion to implosion. The latter is evidenced by a simple and readily observable fact: much — if not most — of what takes place today occurs, so to speak, beneath the surface — below the threshold of vernacular visibility and beyond the

reach of conventional sociological radars — or within enclosed frameworks. Despite the massive technological advancements of our time, the pace of visible transformation in the appearance of European and American cities — as well as in individual ‘products’ — has noticeably slowed. Various forms of interaction between humans, non-humans, and ‘things’ are increasingly being supplanted by proliferating ‘intra-actions’ (Barad 2007), which tend to disregard established physical and conceptual boundaries. This shift brings about significant changes in how we (must) conceptualize meaning and agency. Before addressing these changes, I would like to briefly outline the core presupposition underlying the aforementioned shift in vector: the transversal implosiveness of differentiation processes that operate independently of regional or ontological boundaries. This presupposition lies in the double planarization — of both matter and culture.

Culture Without Content, Matter Without Form

Cultural planarization is an undercurrent that, for a long time, remained largely inconspicuous. As I understand it in this context, planarization refers first and foremost to the gradual shift from a vertical (or pyramidal) organization of cultural experience to a horizontal one — a transition from the paradigm of the eternal, scarcely accessible artwork to that of a fluctuating cultural field that envelops and sustains the individual at every moment of life (Alloway 1959; Joselit 2000; Kaplan 2021). This transition could only occur as an internal transformation of the art realm, which itself inherits its techniques for rendering matter transparent and meaningful from the religious and symbolic practices of earlier eras. The gradually secularized art sphere functioned as a social laboratory for the development and dissemination of cultural techniques aimed at the perceptual plasticization of matter — techniques that ultimately became accessible to a broader public across a wide range of applications. However, whereas religious practices of plasticizing matter to create symbolic presence were grounded in the habitual fusion of specific material configurations with their symbolic representational capacity — that is, in the established unity of symbol, corresponding symbolic practices, and their material vehicle — artistic practices increasingly moved toward dissolving this institutionally controlled and variously regulated bond. It is due to the ungovernable manifold of material media, subjects, and artistic lifestyles that a Williamsian ‘solution’ — saturated with competing projects, world-views, bodies, and media — begins to supersede a pre-given sphere of the symbolic, understood as an external inventory of ‘canonical’

themes and figures. As a result, culture gradually begins to morph into *the cultural*: an amorphous quality potentially attributable to nearly everything around us. This shift was supported and propelled by the proliferation of public museums, the social legitimization of previously pathologized artistic identities and lifestyles, and the establishment of distinct fields of research dedicated to art objects and artistic experience. All of this contributed to the emergence of what Reckwitz describes as the ‘creativity dispositif’ (Reckwitz 2017), the ‘culturalization of the social’ (Reckwitz 2021), and even a new type of society oriented toward the singularization of identities and lifestyles (Reckwitz 2020). In other words, *the cultural* comes to be understood as the condition of an overarching experiential field — one that is indifferent to long-established categorical, that is, ontological, demarcations such as inner and outer, physical and psychical, or material and meaningful. As a result, many of our everyday attitudes and practices increasingly adopt an oneiric mode of experience. Whether in a gallery, on a train, or while reading or walking, we are, to varying degrees and depending on the situation, attentionally dispersed, inflected, multilayered, and slowed. In most cases, the body sheds many of the ‘physical’ tasks it was required to perform just a few decades ago, functioning less as a carrier or material support for consciousness and more as an energetic reservoir for the incessant work of the imagination. The transition from thought to (physical) action has become increasingly fluid — and often unnecessary — since many of the situations and contexts we inhabit now belong not to the sphere of the actual but to what Tia DeNora (2014: 123) calls the ‘virtually real.’

All of this may raise a couple of questions. Should we understand *the cultural* as a kind of powder evenly covering surrounding surfaces and even amalgamating with them, or does culturalization affect the very structure of matter itself? And how can the cultural retain its specificity if it — whether as a region of objects or a qualitative dimension — is no longer distinctly separated from other regions or qualities?

The second question can be answered relatively easily, albeit formally: *the cultural* is no longer a specific region, a repository of objects, a nomenclature of practices, or an attributable property. Rather, it constitutes a kind of aggregate state of a multilayered milieu in which we are persistently embedded — one that is as much outside us as it is within.

Answering the first question requires at least a brief discussion of the role of matter in shaping this dynamic milieu. This brings us to the culturalization of matter, in which the processes of planarization also play a significant role.

The culturalization of matter, such is my thesis, has proceeded through two key phases: an extensive one and an intensive one. The 'dialectical' relationship between these phases once again illustrates — just as it did in the planarization of art — how extensive expansion gives rise to intensive differentiation.

The first phase — extensive and expansionary — involves the proliferation of material objects and surfaces, driven by the developmental logic of industrial capitalism. This same logic — particularly the seriality inherent in it, a drive toward sheer extension — eventually gives rise to what we might call, as in the case of culture, *planarization processes*.

These processes are not confined to the large-scale quantitative expansion of unified material objects increasingly covering pre-given spaces. They also involve the extensive reworking of matter, whereby a vast array of forms and embodiments is transformed into standardized modules and blocks. These, in turn, tend to be arranged — or even extruded — into facades (vertical planarization) and pavements (horizontal planarization). Industrially produced objects are also increasingly losing their depth: their functional elements — once situated beneath the surface and requiring constant penetration (and thus neglect) of that surface — have diminished in significance. Computers, automobiles, mobile phones, and other electronic devices and tools now function with such reliability — and with such uniformity in technical characteristics within each product category — that they no longer demand our focused attention. Moreover, many contemporary industrial products are assembled from identical components and often constructed on shared platforms, a tendency especially evident in the automobile industry.

All of this — paralleled by decentralization processes in the art sphere and in so-called 'culture' more broadly — initiates the aforementioned shift in the developmental vector: from explosive (and ultimately uncontrollable) expansion and reworking of matter to its equally uncontrollable implosive differentiation. As I see it, this shift is driven by two interconnected factors. The first is the increasing compression — or a kind of goffering — of matter, resulting from relentless overproduction. Matter is piling up, folding in on itself, and crumpling, unable to sustain continuous expansion due to the near exhaustion of energetic, ecological, and spatial resources. The relentless expansion of production lines, product series, and infrastructures has reached insurmountable limits and has begun to reverse into its opposite — compression. Its most visible manifestation is the growing accumulation of garbage — fragmented matter — on land and in the sea.

Second, we observe an increasing indifference to the nuances of our overcrowded material and cultural worlds. Culture without content, matter without form: the outer transforms into the inner, retaining its spatial universality while acquiring temporal specificity.

While explosion and extension unfold as a series of successions, implosion and differentiation occur as a momentary shift in an overall ‘aggregate state.’ What was once perceived as infinite surroundings — providing weight and meaning to everything — now appears as a series of peculiar enfoldments (Marks 2024) and envelopes (McCormack 2018), diffracting our intentions and actions and entangling them with the folds of implosive matter (Barad 2007). This matter tends toward non-directional differentiation that alters not so much its form as its very texture.

Material-Perceptual Metabolism: Affects, Elemental Ecologies, and Experiential Concretions

But what exactly does this explosive matter look like? What kind of perception does it prompt, and what sort of relationship to it — and within it — does it require?

As noted earlier, culturalized matter — somewhat paradoxically — enters our experience as a crucial factor through a mode of deficient attention or even indifference. More precisely, it does so through a transformation from one mode of attention to another: from an intellectual focus on functional (deep) characteristics to a distributed (in) attention toward aesthetic, surface qualities. This shift in attention is supported by the aforementioned ‘dialectical’ inversion, in which the extensive expansion of material surfaces gives way to their intensive differentiation. In this sense, the shift is not merely volitional or subjectivist but, on the contrary, ‘accelerationist’ — that is, historically motivated.

What kind of experiential involvement does this shift in attention entail, and what kind of textural organization of matter does it presuppose?

Once again, modularity and seriality tend to render the objects in our surroundings continuous and ecstatic — overlapping with one another and merging into a kind of dense, or rather ever-densifying, ecology. This densification of matter initiates a process of qualitative differentiation — or intensification — whereby its ‘inner’ space becomes increasingly congruent with that of consciousness. Paradigmatic examples include screens and screen-like objects, as noted in the introductory section. Although screens occupy a visible segment

of physical space, they are scarcely objects of perceptual comprehension or meditative contemplation. Rather, they function as spaces of dwelling — a dwelling that is, in many ways, peculiar. First, it is bidirectional in terms of the positioning of the ‘perceiving subject’ in relation to the screen. At the same time, it is non-directional with regard to what unfolds within the screen itself, as this dwelling opens into an indefinite experiential field. Bidirectionality lies in the simultaneity of two opposing yet structurally complementary movements. As perceiving subjects, we approach a screen-like surface, which — integral to this movement — simultaneously enters our consciousness and fills the entire experiential field. This field encompasses both the actual and the virtual, integrating perceptual and imaginative components. This is what Maurice Merleau-Ponty refers to as *chiasm* (Merleau-Ponty 1969) and *transubstantiation* (Toadvine 2007: 353), and what Gottfried Boehm describes as the ‘exchange of matter with reality’ (Boehm 2007: 252). It is worth noting that these countermovements do not converge into a monolith. They are not immersive but imaginative; they do not entrap but liberate — restoring the body as both a resource and a receptacle for the material-perceptual convergences that underlie our experience within screen-like environments. Rather than being engulfed by a pre-given figurational space, we reclaim the body — no longer captured, mobilized, or effectively stolen by any figure, icon, or symbol. Instead, it becomes our own experiential space, endowed with a full range of imaginative-perceptual capacities that tend to coalesce into a ‘virtually real’ experiential field.

Once this bidirectional relationship is established, the non-directional dimension of screen-experiential dwelling comes into play. While bidirectionality defines the experiential positionality of a screen-like surface in relation to a perceiving ‘subject,’ the non-directional aspect characterizes what unfolds within the performative space that this positionality opens. I would term these non-directional processes — albeit provisionally — as *metabolic* and *quantum*.

Borrowed from different disciplines — biology and physics — these terms have developed a kind of productive symbiosis within contemporary image theory. For instance, Sunil Manghani articulates the quantum dimension of image experience as follows: ‘If we are to understand image at its “quantum” level, we need to go beyond the fixed, resolved image or picture and instead approach it more as an epistemological condition, or, as it were, image degree zero’ (Manghani 2020: 266). This suggests that, at its core, our contemporary experience of visual imagery tends toward a lateral sliding across dispersed imaginaries co-present in every perceptual act — or at least toward the abandonment of the accustomed frontal stance. What constitutes the

ultimate — though not necessarily conscious — telos of our imaginary experience, in most cases, is not individual images or their “content,” but rather the *non-visual imaginal*, which precedes any distinction between the ‘real’ and the ‘fictitious’ (Bottici 2014).

Thus, the ‘quantum’ level provides a useful framework for describing the *texture* of intensive matter: it is not so much a substrate as an energy. We do not observe the screen as a self-sufficient entity, nor are we typically content with merely identifying the objects represented on it — at least not in most ‘normal’ cases. Instead, we find ourselves drawn into an involutorial vortex in which everything — objects, images, thoughts, emotions — transforms into uniform quanta.

If a distinction is to be made between the ‘quantum’ level and the ‘metabolic’ aspect, it seems fitting to associate the former with the stage of encounter or perception and the latter with that of interpretation. Interpretation within intensive milieus — of which screen-like surfaces are a paradigmatic example (Angerer 2017) — readily exceeds the bounds of intellectual comprehension, extending into bodily sensation and reverberating across adjacent temporal dimensions of past and future.

In this context, the body functions as a resonance chamber, a receptacle, a repository, or a sensorium — wide open to the elemental flows that traverse all conceivable boundaries of the terrestrial world (Lingis 1988; Engelmann and McCormack 2021; McCormack 2023). In this sense, beyond its merely technical meaning, understanding becomes the act of sustaining and intensifying one’s connections to the liveable world in its zero-degree state or neutrality — a primal scene whose reality lies in its overflowing virtuality and energy. This overflow, this ‘scenic existence’ of human beings (Hogrebe 2009), inevitably extends into what we conventionally refer to as ‘nature,’ which, in this context, is ‘given’ as a normative horizon of experiential completeness.

Non-directionality is further reflected in the heightened and persistent *affectability* that characterizes screen-like milieus. *Affectability* does not refer to a mere capacity for agitation, nor is it, at least initially, a mode of psychic state. In fact, it rarely becomes thematic at all. On the contrary, the term *affectability* is intended to capture the specific intensity of screen-like surface elements that are not merely adjacent to one another — since screen-like surfaces cannot be voluntarily fragmented — but *ecstatic*, characterized by what Davis calls ‘a fundamental structure of exposure’ (Davis 2010: 133). A physical (extensive) surface can be easily segmented, but dividing an image — into which a surface transforms once it begins generating material configurations and textures — is far more difficult, if not impossible.

A defining tendency of the current epoch is that not only surfaces explicitly functioning as images — those representing

something — acquire this generative, or intensive, structure, but much of our surrounding environment does as well, becoming image-like or, at the very least, image-inflected. As a result, nearly all of our everyday experiences unfold inwardly, metabolizing symbolic contents into bodily stances and cognitive attitudes, and densifying the elemental milieus of different orders to which we belong — regardless of the type or direction of action being performed at any given moment. In other words, we both build and become experiential concretions.

Imaginal Acceleration

In the remainder of the article, I will examine the political and ethical implications of cultural-material implosion, previously outlined as part of a preliminary social-theoretical diagnosis. I now aim to develop this inquiry in greater depth.

From a social-theoretical perspective, the notion of social implosion situates itself within the framework of social imaginary theory, primarily associated with Cornelius Castoriadis (1987), Benedict Anderson (2006), and Charles Taylor (2004). More recently, Chiara Bottici has extended this tradition through her project of *imaginal politics* (Bottici 2014). What unites these theoretical initiatives is not merely an interest in the social potential of the imagination, but a shared belief in the genealogical, ontological, and structural entanglements between the social sphere and the imaginary.

I understand the imaginary — contrary to the somewhat subjectivist approaches of Castoriadis, Anderson, and Taylor, and closer, in a sense, to what Bottici refers to as the *imaginal* — as a kind of zero-point: a primary disclosure of the original scene of the social, with its elemental ties to the ‘natural’ world. This disclosure is not a singular event but an ‘aggregate state’ that requires periodic renewal — a Williamsian saturated solution in which the material and the meaningful, action and thought, the real and the possible remain undivided. Like Bottici, I regard the imaginal as a medial sphere that ‘precedes the distinction between the “real” and the “fictitious”’ (Bottici 2019: 3).

However, unlike Bottici, I propose grounding the *imaginal* not only in a more elaborated notion of the image but also in the broader material conditions of its respective historical moment. As should be evident from the preceding discussion, these two dimensions are both historically and structurally interconnected. The current conditions of the imaginal are shaped not only by the ‘stream of images’ (Bottici 2019: 5), which diminishes the symbolic potential of each individual

image, but more fundamentally by the observable tendency of our material surroundings to become image- or screen-like – to transform into what Giuliana Bruno calls a ‘screen-membrane’ (Bruno 2014: 5).

This tendency is driven not only by the cultural devaluation of the symbolic or figurational realm – a consequence of the planarization of culture – but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, by economic processes of the culturalization of matter, which themselves arise from the perceptual and physical overlapping of material surfaces. This overlapping – motivated by both economic and ecological factors – initiates structural transformations of matter toward its differential intensification, leading to implosive processes of material-cultural metabolism.

My thesis is that this metabolism constitutes the current condition of the imaginal. Because this state of the imaginal emerges from relentless material-historical dynamics, we are witnessing a process of imaginal acceleration: an unprecedented historical surge of the imaginal driven by non-imaginative forces. Since this surge is both intensive and, in a sense, inward-looking, I term it *implosive*.

From Symbolic to Scenic: Agency Beyond the Activity/Passivity Divide and the Choric Dimension of Experiential Concretions

One of the consequences of imaginal acceleration is that social life in the contemporary world is increasingly becoming imaginative – or, as Reckwitz puts it, culturalized (Reckwitz 2021). This process is not necessarily conscious. On the one hand, it stems from the ongoing, internally driven transformation of radically non-imaginative spheres such as the economy and technology – non-imaginative, at least in the sense of aesthetic creativity. On the other hand, imagination within the realm of the imaginal is rarely an isolated or explicitly marked activity. On the contrary, imaginal acceleration entails a gradual shift in dominant experiential attitudes, one of whose core consequences is a reconfiguration of the very notion of agency and, by extension, of what we are inclined to regard as a good life.

As noted above, I have already introduced an *oneiric* experiential mode characteristic of (over-)culturalized social and material spaces. In this context, *oneiric* – among other things, such as liberating the body from its ‘physical’ duties and temporarily transforming it into a reservoir of pure virtuality – signifies a kind of affirmative hesitation, a state of generative undecidedness, or what Sobchack calls a ‘transcendence in immanence’ (Sobchack 2023: 151).

Here, action and agency are no longer required to operate as ontological transfers from the mental to the physical realm. Nor must action necessarily manifest in visual or verbal form. It can be fulfilled without articulating itself into a readable – or otherwise externally identifiable – gestalt. In many, if not most, cases, it unfolds as an undercurrent of micro-events, coalescing into a new – albeit temporary – experiential concretion.

For example, activities such as reading, writing, visiting museums or cinemas – as well as walking, conversing, and other ‘ordinary’ actions – can follow unregulated trajectories, unexpected detours, and divergent paths that significantly reshape what is traditionally confined within their respective categories. When we also take into account the symbolic devaluation of cultural products resulting from their ‘planar’ and increasingly non-hierarchical status, we begin to perceive a large-scale transformation of the overall experiential field.

One of the defining traits of this transformation is the shift from discrete acts to a continuous concrescence, into which all of our significant and signifying experiences gradually coalesce. Rather than a product – or even a performance – it is (metabolic) sedimentation that begins to take precedence. The performative ascent to the realm of the symbolic, inherent in every aesthetic experience or communicative encounter, slows down and ultimately withdraws into the very ground from which it originated – what, following Plato, Kristeva, and Derrida, may be referred to as *chōra*: an under-articulated and thus indefinite space that both gives rise to and accommodates any creative act or experience.

Examples of *chōra* might include the canvas or ground of an emergent image, an archive, a database, an affect, or human memory. Each foray into the symbolic realm must ultimately withdraw into the choric – or at the very least, remain in resonance with it. Every action is balanced by its opposite: genuinely consequential agency transcends the activity/passivity divide. This dynamic movement – oscillating back and forth so long as equilibrium is maintained – creates and sustains what Wolfram Högbe refers to as *the scenic* (Högbe 2019).

The *scenic* holds ontological priority over whatever ‘fills’ it, yet remains epistemologically marginalized due to its medial nature: it gives place and rise to all that emerges, while itself receding into a non-objectifiable background. If it is accessible at all, it is only indirectly – through (in)attentive practices rather than through explicit knowledge.⁸

8 For example, Paul Frosh, in his recent book, discusses the positive epistemological and ethical implications of an inattentive stance supported by media (Frosh 2019).

Engaged Withdrawal: Post-Activist Practices

How might such practices take shape? And what are their social and political implications? We can gain insight from a range of contemporary socio- and media-theoretical, ethnographic, and philosophical projects. Ambient rhetoric — an emergent sub-discipline within the social sciences — places significant emphasis on sub-symbolic, environmental forms of communication and meaning (Rickert 2014; McNely 2024). This approach entails a bidirectional dynamic, similar to that discussed earlier: the distributed — and in this sense, ambient — nature of a genuine act of persuasion requires the simultaneity of engagement and withdrawal, of activity and passivity, of a frontal communicative gesture alongside attunement to lateral paths of (choric) materiality and affectability.

A notable strand of contemporary social theory draws attention to both the cultural and experiential dimensions of social life. The specific agency of material and personal iconicity (Alexander 2012; Sonnevend 2024) constitutes a key focus within cultural sociology. Scholars such as Tia DeNora and Scott Lash, along with proponents of the so-called new sociology of art, underscore the creative and disclosive potential of perceptive experiences that have traditionally been regarded as transitive — that is, lacking internal specificity, passive, and requiring conceptual articulation (DeNora 2014; Lash 2018; Hennion 2014, 2019).

Within contemporary German sociology, several theoretical projects emphasize the socially consequential differences among core modalities of experience (Schulze 1992, 2015; Rosa 2020). A specific form of agency may emerge through a shift from symbolically articulated, channeled (even engulfed), frontally oriented modes of perception and action to non-channeled, under-articulated, and laterally oriented modalities.

In his early large-scale empirical and theoretical project, Gerhard Schulze proposed — as a form of social time-diagnosis — the notion of an incremental yet radical shift in general experiential attitudes toward the world, both social and physical: from an external to an internal orientation, from the accumulation of resources to the intensification of lived experience, and from matter to meaning (Schulze 1992). Despite the sweeping nature of this shift, however, the new experiential attitude — and its corresponding logic of lived-experience rationality — remained success-oriented. This time, though, the objects of success calculations became lived experiences themselves, along with whatever serves to intensify them. Yet because the experiential sphere is far less susceptible to calculation than the ‘outer realm,’ the

relentless pursuit of greater ‘quality’ and intensity of experience inevitably gives rise to frustration.

In his much later and more concise follow-up to the book, Schulze introduces the notion of self-transcendence — not only as a conceptual refinement, but also as a social-practical development of what he previously termed the ‘experience society’ (Schulze 2015). Self-transcendence cannot be the direct aim of an experience; it can only arise as an indirect or collateral outcome — an ‘encounter by the way.’ It is incalculable due to its intransitivity: as a ‘goal in itself,’ self-transcendent lived experience manifests as a swarm or cloud of micro-events — a transformative vortex that turns the outer world into the inner one, and vice versa. As Schulze himself puts it, ‘self-transcendence is intrinsic in the sense that the action itself is seen as rewarding’ (Schulze 2015: 171).

In his 800-page foundational work, Hartmut Rosa introduces and elaborates the concept of *resonance* as a fundamentally human mode of experience (Rosa 2019). Rather than perceiving the world as a ‘point of aggression,’ he argues that we should strive to experience it as a ‘point of resonance’ (Rosa 2021). In contrast to Schulze, Rosa focuses not only on the mode of experience but also on the mode of existence of the material world — an emphasis that highlights certain advantages of the term *resonance* over Schulze’s *self-transcendence*. However, Rosa’s project lacks a detailed examination of the corresponding transformations in the material textures of the resonating world.

Recently, Eduardo de la Fuente has attempted to address this gap through his project of *textural sociology*. Yet, perhaps due to its still-emergent nature, his work has not yet offered concrete examples of ‘textural thinking’ (de la Fuente 2019: 6).

At the philosophical end of the spectrum of efforts to conceptualize what I call *post-activist agency*, Jane Bennett — among others — offers valuable theoretical insights. Beyond emphasizing the osmotic relationship between thought and matter (Bennett 2010), she articulates a dynamic exchange of matter and energy — an ‘influx and efflux’ — between the human and non-human components of an integrated, vibrant world (Bennett 2020).

An overarching tendency uniting these theoretical endeavors is a resistance to the compelling pull embedded in every manifestation of the symbolic — whether in direct address, artistic or social icons, ideological slogans, or similar forms. The experiential mode that corresponds to such symbolic forms is characterized by its transitory and channeled trajectory, mono-modality, mono-sensoriality, and emotionally reactive orientation. It functions, in this sense, like a kind of ‘tunnel vision’: it has low resolving capacity and, as a consequence,

lacks access to highly differentiated textures — whether material or social.

By contrast, the post-activist experiential mode exhibits opposite characteristics: it is non-transitory, meaning it cannot be fully contained by the object of perception or by a succession of experiences that transcend their temporal and spatial boundaries toward some overarching goal — a goal that does not require the experiences to be explicitly articulated and may, moreover, retroactively imbue them with meaning.

The post-activist experiential mode is non-channeled, making it difficult to be ‘policed’ by external forces due to its non-directionality and its implosive, unregulated differentiation. It is also multi-modal and multi-sensory, which is evinced, among other things, in its embeddedness within the *affectability* of its elemental milieu. This affective dimension does not manifest as *emotions* adhering to and governed by the symbolic but rather as *affect* belonging to a broader ambient field. Consequently, post-activist experience is characterized by high resolution, enabling it to be slowed down, intercepted, and enriched — or contaminated — by material and social textures. It is clear that the experiential attitudes described above carry corresponding normative implications — both ethical and political — which I will briefly address in the final subsection of this article.

Ethics and Politics of Laterality: Inflection, Viscosity, Hesitation

An implosive society — if such a phenomenon exists or is beginning to emerge — must necessarily be political. First and foremost, if the implosive mode of social organization prevails (even relatively), the historically established cultural and social ties that have long served as gravitational anchors for the political will no longer be as inexorable.

Indeed, this already appears to be the case. Today, not only is the once-unified Judeo-Christian tradition receding, but the very principle of historical inheritance is being eroded by the intensifying pressures of an accelerating present. The long, once clearly discernible trajectories of the symbolic no longer hold us captive as they did less than a century ago. It is not only religious tradition that has waned; the cultural sphere — once envisioned as an ever-rising pyramid of human ‘intellectual’ achievement — no longer looms on our horizon as an unshakable landmark. ‘Culture’ has stretched into a ‘long front’ (Al-loway 1959), or — if we extend the notion further — has shattered into quanta: fragments, echoes, sediments, and the like, which can now be

projected, configured, and reconfigured across nearly any (screen-like) surface.

These generative surfaces, in turn — as integral elements of post-activist experiential concretion — participate in what we previously referred to as material-perceptual metabolism. That said, the production and intensive deployment of the symbolic, or the figurational, continues unabated. Indeed, the symbolic constitutes a sphere of *affirmative alienation*: it takes, but it also gives. It demands time and energy from the individual, yet compensates for this sacrifice by opening up a shared — though uniform — space.

Thus, everything that belongs to the realm of the symbolic and signification is inherently political. Castoriadis' key insight was to reveal this fact and to recognize in it a path toward social emancipation (*autonomy*). However, he aimed to regulate access to signification while leaving the foundational status of the symbolic itself intact. In this respect, the strategy of resistance proposed by Julia Kristeva — if we choose, for whatever reason, to remain within the psychoanalytic paradigm — strikes me as more productive: a perpetual retreat into the generative space of the 'semiotic chora' (Kristeva 1984: 28).

This retreat, however, entails the pursuit of a politics (and ethics) of laterality, in contrast to the frontality of direct political action, which — regardless of its manifest goals, couched in symbolic terms — remains compromised by its complicity in the restoration of the alienating power of the symbolic or, at the very least, in its instrumentalization.

A hint at what such a politics might look like — and how it might be conceptualized — can be found, for example, in the works of Sara Ahmed, Alia Al-Saji, and Kathleen Stewart. Each of them — whether focusing on 'stickiness' as a mode of affective transfer (Ahmed 2014: 91), hesitation as an emancipatory perceptual attitude (Al-Saji 2014), or 'worlding' as the practice of perceptually and affectively constructing and reconstructing the nearest social world (Stewart 2014) — traces the lateral lines that bind us to the world and to one another, prior to and beyond the annihilating power of the symbolic.

Conclusion: Hypo-Culture, Respiratory Thinking, and the Future of Social Theory

A rebellion against the symbolic should not be interpreted as a rebellion against the meaningful. I advocate for the *politicization* of the symbolic — not its abolition — which, I must admit, is neither possible nor necessary. The symbolic — whether verbal, visual, or bodily-performative (ritual) — remains, and will continue to remain, indispensable.

What must be abandoned, and what is already underway, is any attempt to solidify it.

In a sense, we should remain on the verge of its dissolution — and today, we are compelled to do so. This compulsion arises from the symbolic itself: from its current tendency to dissolve into a diffuse ecology composed not only of adjacent ‘meaningful entities’ but increasingly ‘contaminated’ by culturalized matter. The *meaningful* no longer needs to be *drawn out* into argumentation or narrative, nor *unfolded* into spatial composition on a pictorial surface. While it can — and in many cases must — take such forms, it no longer requires them by necessity.

The relationship between the symbolic and the choric — as it unfolds in everyday practices — can be most effectively described through the model of breathing. Any communicative expression, perceptual encounter, or purposive activity may be understood as an exhalation (dilation), followed by an inhalation (contraction), during which thoughts, impressions, intentions, images, sounds, and other elements are gathered, compressed, digested, sedimented, and metabolized.

Both phases are increasingly supported by mediating technologies. The most eloquent example of media support for the exhalation phase — epitomized by various forms of emanative irradiation such as attention, intentionality, speech acts, and so on — would be social network media. In contrast, generative AI exemplifies media support for the inhalation phase. This two-way process — these two phases of breathing — from the frontal (unidirectional, intentional, extensive, reactive, aggressive) to the lateral (multi- or non-directional, intensive, hesitant, affective, implosive), and vice versa, gravitates toward a zero-point of virtual integrity: a state of balance and neutrality that transcends distinctions between activity and passivity, matter and meaning, future and present.

In terms of a cultural model, we might identify two complementary modes. *Hyper-culture* — a phase of dilation or even dispersion, which Reckwitz (2021) describes as the current condition of culture — serves as a freely available reservoir of images, forms, styles, and other elements for individual self-development. This mode should be balanced by *hypo-culture* — a phase of contraction or saturation (a Williamsian ‘solution’). Perceiving and understanding within contemporary cultural ecologies now resembles inhaling, digesting, and metabolizing more than it does the intellectual act of extracting a singular ‘meaning.’ It may be more fitting to envision the *meaningful* not as something extracted from a mass of matter, but as an envelope, skin, or atmosphere — one that transcends the boundaries between inner and outer.

Why should we not think of social theory in the same vein? Is it not projective rather than merely descriptive? It seems to me that — much like the dynamic between *hyper-* and *hypo-culture* — various social theories, each as a form of self- and world-articulation (a kind of exhale), coagulate in their next state (a kind of inhale) at the moment of reception — whether by readers or through other means — into a complex virtuality. This virtuality could, and indeed should, serve as the foundation for a practical, and thus more-than-theoretical, form of individual self-understanding. In this sense, social theory itself becomes *respiratory*.

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