

Runaway Male Fantasies: A Cybernetic Interpretation of Becoming-Fascist

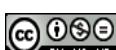
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Abstract:

This article offers a cybernetic interpretation of the role the imagination plays in fascism. First, I address Deleuze and Guattari's response to Reich, who according to them adequately poses the problem of fascism by asking how the masses came to desire their own repression, but who supposes two distinct realities — the rational socio-economic reality and the irrational sexual or psychic reality of desire — thus reintroducing the idea of deception into his explanation. Then I discuss how, in contrast to this, Deleuze and Guattari, and later Theweleit, focus on fantasies and on groups in order to account for fascist desire. Drawing on Bion's group dynamics, I discuss Guattari's distinction between the subjected group and the subject-group, which he associates with two different group fantasy functions, and I show that in the subjected group, group fantasies take on a repressive function of cybernetic totalisation, which can be considered as microfascist and proto-totalitarian. The relation between microfascism and molar fascism remaining somewhat unclear in Deleuze and Guattari's writings as well as in Theweleit, I end by suggesting that we can account for this relation by looking at it as a runaway process, where existing, segregative and homogenising microfascist tendencies are reinforced through positive feedback originating from cultural productions like speeches, propaganda, popular songs and literature, etc., which produce redundancies and resonance with the existing system. When this kind of aberrant process goes together with and exacerbates a culture of repression, which blocks out many of the pathways for desire, it tends to develop into a violent line of abolition, where the only possible desire left is the desire for death and destruction.

Keywords: *Fascism, microfascism, group fantasy, Deleuze and Guattari, Klaus Theweleit*

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Résumé :

Cet article propose une interprétation cybernétique du rôle que joue l'imagination dans le fascisme. Tout d'abord, j'aborde la réponse de Deleuze et Guattari à Reich, qui, selon eux, pose de manière adéquate le problème du fascisme en se demandant comment les masses en sont venues à désirer leur propre répression, mais qui suppose deux réalités distinctes — à savoir la réalité socio-économique et la réalité sexuelle ou psychique du désir — réintroduisant ainsi l'idée de déception dans son explication. Ensuite, je montre comment, en réponse à Reich, Deleuze et Guattari, et plus tard Theweleit, se concentrent sur les fantasmes et sur les groupes afin d'expliquer le désir fasciste. En m'appuyant sur la dynamique de groupe de Bion, j'aborde la distinction entre groupe-sujet et groupe assujetti, que Guattari associe à deux fonctions différentes du fantasme de groupe, en démontrant que dans le groupe assujetti, le fantasme de groupe fonctionne de manière répressive, en opérant une totalisation cybernétique microfasciste et proto-totalitaire. La relation entre microfascisme et fascisme molaire restant quelque peu floue dans les écrits de Deleuze et Guattari ainsi que chez Theweleit, je termine en suggérant que l'on peut rendre compte de cette relation en la considérant comme un processus cybernétique de dérapage ou de fuite, où les tendances microfascistes existantes, ségrégatives et homogénéisantes, sont renforcées par une rétroaction positive provenant de productions culturelles telles que les discours, la propagande, les chansons et la littérature populaires, etc., qui produisent des redondances et des résonances par rapport au système existant. Lorsque ce genre de processus aberrant s'accompagne d'une culture de répression et l'exacerbe, bloquant les voies au désir, il tend à se développer en une ligne violente d'abolition, où le seul désir possible restant est le désir de mort et de destruction.

Mots clés : *Fascisme, microfascisme, fantasme de groupe, Deleuze et Guattari, Klaus Theweleit*

Given the current political climate, this article proposes an exploration of the role the imagination plays in fascist power formations. While much attention has been paid to the manipulation of emotions and desires in fascist regimes, the role of the fascist imagination remains underexamined — this seems crucial today, given the pervasive role of visual culture and digital media in shaping individual and collective consciousness. An important exception to this is Klaus Theweleit's two-volume work, *Male Fantasies* (2003 [1977], 1996 [1978]), which illustrates the crucial role of fantasies in German fascism. On the basis of pieces of popular literature written by *Freikorps* and Nazist writers, Theweleit shows how elements such as a repugnance

of womanhood and fantasies around masculinity, military culture, violence, and authority constituted a destructive fascist imaginary world. As we will see, these fascist male fantasies strongly resonate with what we can observe in the so-called manosphere today (see for example Sugiura 2021).

Theweleit's analyses have a lot in common with those of Wilhelm Reich as well as with those of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (whom he profusely cites). Most notably, like them, he does not content himself with considering that the masses were deceived by fascist power, but attempts to account for why people *desired* fascism (Reich 1970 [1933]: 19–25, 35–6, 115; Theweleit 1996: 349; Deleuze and Guattari 2000 [1972]: 38). In other words, he takes the seemingly “irrational” aspects of fascism seriously, and refuses to reduce them to the influence of an external reality, like the power of suggestion of the fascist leader. What is more, he does not reduce fascism to an historical phenomenon, which would be reducible to a political regime or form of government, and explicable through socio-economic factors (notably Reich 1970: 22–8, 79–80; Theweleit 2003: 221, 352). Theweleit rather considers fascism as a psychic constellation, which is continuus with the “normal” psyche, in such a way that proto-fascist tendencies do not necessarily imply a full-blown political fascism. Just like Deleuze and Guattari, he believes that, at the core of fascism, there is a desire for death and destruction (see notably Theweleit 1996: 386 and Deleuze and Guattari 2005 [1980]: 231). This view differs from Reich's — as well as from that of Horkheimer and Adorno, for example — notably because it does not consider identification with the leader to be a pivotal aspect (Theweleit 1996: 413) and tends to downplay the role of Oedipus and of authority (see notably Reich 1970: 30-1 and Theweleit 2003: 222). Instead, this view focuses on examining pre-Oedipal mechanisms, such as mechanisms for the generation of self-cohesion, and fantasies of destruction, inspired by Melanie Klein (Theweleit 1996: 216–7).

I propose to contribute to existing efforts to understand and resist fascism from a Deleuzoguattarian perspective (notably Protevi 2000 and Braidotti and Dolphijn 2022 and Massumi 2025a and b), by shedding light, not so much on the content of the fascist imaginary, as Theweleit does, but rather on the way in which imaginary formations *operate* in the fascist collectivity. In order to do this, I will first briefly address Deleuze and Guattari's response to Reich, whom they applaud for having adequately posed the problem of fascism, by recognising that the masses must somehow *desired (their own) repression*, but whom according to them reintroduces the problem of deception that he was trying to avoid, because of his notion of irrational desire. Then, I will discuss how Deleuze and Guattari, and following them Theweleit, depart from a different psychoanalytic perspective in order to analyse fascist desire, emphasising the pre-Oedipal psychic reality and the role of (group) fantasies. I will address Guattari's distinction between two kinds of groups, namely subjected groups and subject-groups, with their corresponding two kinds of group fantasies, which function in a different way. Relating this distinction to observations

of the group dynamist Wilfred Bion, I will demonstrate that the role of imaginary formations within subjected groups can be described as micro-fascist and proto-totalitarian, as they generate a cybernetic-like process of totalization and repression. I will end by proposing a cybernetic interpretation of the relation between this kind of microfascism and molar fascism — whose relation remains somewhat unclear in Deleuze and Guattari, which makes them unable to explain molar fascism. I will supplement their explanation — which rests upon the notion of the line of abolition and the idea of redundancy and of an all too-sudden destratification (Deleuze and Guattari 2005: 165, 230–1, 503) — and argue that we should understand this as a runaway process, where the group phantasy and the repressive, micro-fascist desire of a subjected group are reinforced through positive feedback — engendered by the content of speeches, literature, propaganda, and other media — leading not to a productive line of flight capable of transformation, but to a deadly line of destruction and abolition, which produces a sudden destratification.

In this way, this article offers a new synthesis of psychoanalysis, Deleuzo-Guattarian thought, and cybernetic theory to demonstrate how the notion of feedback provides a more precise account of the rise of fascist formations. Through the exploration of how media content affects the unconscious and the collectivity, this will also shed light on the relation that researchers have revealed between far-right and fascist ideologies and the contemporary male and misogynist imagination, and particularly on the role (digital) media play in this context.

Thinking Fascism With and Beyond Reich

Wilhelm Reich was one of Freud's disciples, who was also of Jewish descent. He wanted to show the socio-economic origins of mental suffering, and can thus be called one of the founders of Freudo-Marxism (see for example Plon and Roudinesco 2000: 905–10 and Theweleit 2003: 223–4). In Deleuze and Guattari's appreciative words, "Reich was the first to attempt to make the analytic machine and the revolutionary machine function together" (Deleuze and Guattari [hereafter: DG] 2000: 38). His political views led to his eventual exclusion of the International Psychoanalytic Association, whose members were quite conservative politically. Moreover, they believed that Reich was schizophrenic and did not appreciate his unconventional approach, which combined traditional analysis with tactile, bodily intervention. He did this because his observations led him to associate neurosis with a stiffness or rigidity in the body — like an armor — which could be loosened, to the advantage both of the sexual energy or flow and of the speech therapy.

This idea of a sexual or vital energy — or desire — which streams or flows (see notably Reich 1993 [1927]), is taken up by Deleuze and Guattari and Theweleit, who associate it with schizophrenia (DG 2000: especially 292 and Theweleit 2003: 249–51, 254). Deleuze and Guattari also follow Reich in the role he ascribes to the family, which combines social and psychic or sexual repression. Indeed, Reich

already noted that “[t]he interlacing of the socio-economic structure with the sexual structure of society and the structural reproduction of society take place in the [...] authoritarian family [...] the factory in which the state’s structure and ideology are molded” (Reich 1970: 30). Deleuze and Guattari add that, because of its focus on Oedipus as a mechanism of psychic rather than social repression, psychoanalysis is able to ignore social repression, which makes it politically conservative and reactionary (DG 2000: 117).

Deleuze and Guattari further praise Reich for having asked the right question in relation to fascism — a Spinozist question that they consider fundamental to political philosophy: “‘Why do men fight for their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation?’ How can people possibly reach the point of shouting: ‘More taxes! Less bread!’?” (*Ibid.* 38). Reich indeed affirms that “fascism is to be regarded as a problem of the masses” (Reich 1970: 98). What is more, he refused to accept any explanation that relied on the idea that these masses were deceived, as Marxists tend to believe: the people must somehow have desired repression and fascism (*Ibid.* 19–25, 35–6, 115; Deleuze and Guattari 2000: 118). According to him, “[t]o stress this guilt on the part of masses of people, to hold them solely responsible, means to take them seriously” (Reich 1970: 345). It is this problem, namely the question why or how the masses ended up desiring fascism, which Reich explores in his *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, and which Deleuze and Guattari take up again in *Anti-Oedipus*, as they are not fully satisfied with Reich’s theory. According to them, Reich’s explanations “amount to a reintroduction of the error or the illusion” (*Ibid.* 119; Theweleit agrees with this and cites a long passage of Deleuze and Guattari, see Theweleit 1996: 416–7). In other words, while Reich aims to explain how the masses could possibly desire fascism without being manipulated, his explanation nevertheless still seems to rely on the idea of deception. This critique can seem somewhat severe, especially considering Reich’s effort to take desire seriously, but I will show in what sense it seems warranted. We will also see that Deleuze and Guattari’s objections are connected to Reich’s distinction between sexual economy and socio-political economy, which in their view constitute one and the same economy.

According to Reich, “fascism [...] is a concept denoting a very definite kind of mass leadership and mass influence: authoritarian, one-party system, hence totalitarian, a system in which *power takes priority over objective interests, and facts are distorted for political purposes*. Hence, there are ‘fascist Jews,’ just as there are ‘fascist Democrats’” (Reich 1970: 213–4; my emphasis). In Nazi Germany this further implied an “intensive identification with the *führer*” which “concealed one’s real status as an insignificant member of the masses” (*Ibid.* 80). In this context, the authority, success, and power of the leader must have been conveyed to him by the masses themselves, and not be derived from some manipulation of the leader himself or from some transcendent reality (Reich 1970: 40). This idea resonates with Theweleit’s observation (Theweleit 1996: 408–10) about how Hitler appeared

somewhat clumsy or even ridiculous, but that this seemed to be intended. This made the *Führer* approachable; it made him look like “one of us.” This further means that, if he was regarded as flawless and as standing above all critique, this is because his soldiers and other followers *wanted him to be so*. “The *Führer* is, or, rather, is required to be, flawless; but, unlike the Pope for example, his flawlessness is no gift from the heavens. It is a desire on the part of his subordinates, who derive security from the knowledge that he is above criticism” (*Ibid.* 410).

The question arises as to why the masses were drawn to this form of leadership. Reich posits that “the lower middle classes [...] constituted the *mass basis* of fascism” (Reich 1970: 6). He further explains this through their “character structure” which according to him “reproduces the social structure of society in the form of ideologies” (*Ibid.* xii). He argues that

“fascism” is only the organized political expression of the structure of the average man’s character [...] Viewed with respect to man’s character, “fascism” is the basic emotional attitude of the suppressed man of our authoritarian machine civilization and its mechanistic-mystical conception of life. It is the mechanistic-mystical character of modern man that produces fascist parties, and not vice versa (*Ibid.* xiii).

In short, for Reich, the fascist mentality is the mentality of the suppressed man, who is at the same time rebellious and in need of authority, and which is the man that our mechanised and patriarchal civilisation has produced (*Ibid.* xv, 281). In this context, Reich emphasises that fascism is not confined to specific races or nations but is rather international and anhistorical. This perspective resonates with Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of microfascism (notably DG 2005; see below), as Reich contends that every individual harbors elements of fascism within themselves.

Reich sets out to explain how the character structure of the suppressed man allowed fascism to emerge. According to him, at the time of the rise of fascism, they lived in a “machine civilization” because they had a lot of faith in and use of machines, as well as a mechanistic view of life and of the economy (Reich 1970: 31, 58, 335–41) — which is arguably still the case today. This was combined with a certain authoritarianism, in the sense that people were incapable of freedom and thus dependent on authority (*Ibid.* xxvii). Reich relates this authoritarianism to the patriarchal structure of society and with the nuclear family. According to him, the “authoritarian structure [...] is basically produced by the embedding of sexual inhibitions and fear in the living substance of sexual impulses,” which happens in the family, in such a way that “the family is the authoritarian state in miniature” (*Ibid.* 30). In this context, the role of the father mirrors the political and economic authority of the state, and the family becomes a key instrument of authority, that is, of psychic, sexual, and social repression, which foster helplessness, dependency, and

an attitude of submission to authority. This process further requires an identification with the father. In this way, it lays the foundation for identification with and dependency on other authority figures, such as the political leader. It is interesting to note, with Reich, that such a structure can lead to neurosis, as the repression of sexuality and the obsession with maintaining notions of honor, duty, and self-control become emotionally charged, pathological constructs (*Ibid.* 53–6). This authoritatively structured basis also forms the basis for nationalism and for a more or less intense identification with the fascist leader.

Indeed, as Reich writes, “[t]he more helpless the ‘mass-individual’ has become, owing to his upbringing, the more pronounced is his identification with the *führer*, and the more the childish need for protection is disguised in the form of a feeling at one with the *führer*. This inclination to identify is the psychological basis of national narcissism” (*Ibid.* 63). Reich explains what he calls “*the irrational core of nationalism*” (*Ibid.* 56, italics mine), by relating feelings of nationalism to the idea of a moral privilege — or supremacy — rooted in the authoritative position of the state and of officials who identify with power (*Ibid.* 46–7). He describes how national honor becomes a primordial value, alongside the personal and family honor, and he notes the connection to capitalist values and patriarchy. In this context, the structure of Oedipus transforms into a reactionary, nationalist social force: the needs of the family mirror those of the nation, while compelling the nation to expand and confront its enemies. What is more, because the leader also offers protection, he assumes a father-like role. In this way, the national leader comes to embody at the same time the nation and the paternal figure, which produces in the people a strong emotional bond with him. It is interesting to already note that this resonates with Wilfred Bion’s idea of a basic assumption of some groups, who need a leader or father figure to hold them together, like a helpless organism (Bion 2004 [1961]: 74, 147).

According to Reich, because of the tendency among workers to increasingly adopt bourgeois values, in a shift away from revolutionary ideals and social responsibility — of which the devaluation of manual labour and the bureaucratization of the workers’ movement were symptoms — the psychological structure of the workers would also have become receptive to this kind of “conservative structuralization” (*Ibid.* 74). This enabled fascism “*to exploit the masses’ disappointment in Social Democracy and their ‘rebellion against the system’ for its own narrow purposes*” (*Ibid.*, italics mine).

Reich also observes a mystical dimension to the character structure of his contemporaries (*Ibid.* 28): this dimension facilitates the repression of sexuality and implies a certain ascetism, in the name of religion, ethics, or simply civilisation. This sexual repression, which as we have seen happens mainly in the authoritarian, patriarchal family according to Reich, is an important element, as “sexual inhibition changes the structure of economically suppressed man in such a way that he acts, feels, and thinks contrary to his own material interests” (*Ibid.* 32). This repression

makes people helpless: it makes them unable to think properly, and it encourages unhealthy abstinence (*Ibid.* 125–8). It makes them replace sexual excitations with other excitations, like religious ones, which make them dependent and fearful (*Ibid.* 146–51). According to Reich, producing a mystical structure in masses of young men means producing in them an unconscious or repressed longing for orgasm (*Ibid.* 168–9). Because of the ascetic aspect of the structure, this desire is intensified, turning sexuality into something brutal and sadistic, which degrades and enslaves women — this kind of unhealthy sexuality becomes the norm (*Ibid.* 88–9, 105–11).¹

What is more, as the common man's self-confidence is degraded because of this unhealthy sexuality and sensuousness, he becomes accessible to reactionary values such as purity, honor etc., and adopts defensive and reactionary attitudes, like the nationalist one. He becomes unable to master his sexual forces — which become all the more stronger when he tries to resist them — hence in need of rigid containment. This constitutes the perfect soil for a fascist movement able to use and sustain this distorted sexuality, these homosexual and sadistic feelings, and this ascetism (*Ibid.* 192).

Indeed, for Reich the distorted idea of sexuality as “dirty and sensual” (*Ibid.* 100) also opens the way to irrational ideas around racial purity — according to Reich this is not only the case in Germany, but something similar happened in the United States. What is more, we should see the National Socialists' imperialism and their economical programme as an extension of their purist racial theory of Aryan supremacy, which is used to justify imperialism and war (*Ibid.* 75–8, 81–2). As we will see, the motif of gender inequality and the repression of women will become even more central in Theweleit's analyses, where it will also be related to racism. According to Reich, this theory is irrational and contains contradictions, notably the idea of racial purity which is nonsensical and unrealistic, but it is exactly because it is irrational that it works: it gives “expression to certain *unconscious* and *emotional* currents prevalent in the nationalistically disposed man and of concealing certain psychic tendencies” (*Ibid.* 78).

It will have become clear to the reader why Deleuze and Guattari affirm that Reich reintroduces the idea of illusion or error, of manipulation or deception, in his explanation of fascism through an analysis of the unconscious character structure of the masses. This explanation indicates how emotions and the unconscious can prevail over rational arguments (*Ibid.* 34) and, consequently, how the irrational content of slogans can have such an impact (*Ibid.* 129) or how, more generally, propaganda can count on profound irrational feelings in order to influence people, without revealing its true intentions (*Ibid.* 104). In other words, what Reich's theory

¹ In this context, Reich describes something akin to Bateson and Deleuze and Guattari's double bind: he describes how, through the mystical and authoritarian structure, people are made to believe that they must choose between on the one hand, a brutal sexuality or, on the other hand, an ascetic and compulsive sexual morality — in religious terms: God and saviour or sexuality (Reich, 1970: 111, 161–2).

explains is *how fascism was able to deceive the masses*. In Reich's own words: “[t]he insights we gain from character-analytic treatment [...] reveal the contradictions, forces, and counter-forces in the average individual” (*Ibid.* 180), and they show how “*They [the masses] had grossly deceived themselves and were defeated by their own irrationalism, i.e., their fear of social responsibility*” (*Ibid.* 228). Even if this deception is partially internal, or embedded in the collective psyche's mysticism and irrational desire, rather than solely caused by external manipulation, we can still speak of deception and manipulation here.

According to Reich, the masses were manipulated by Hitler because his national-socialism was not in their true, *material* and *social* interests. National Socialism was “not, as is commonly believed, a purely reactionary movement” but “it represent[ed] an amalgam between *rebellious* emotions and reactionary social ideas” (*Ibid.* xiv). In other words, Nazism relied on a revolutionary will, which was directed against capital. This was exploited by the fascist machine, which echoed communist propaganda, using revolutionary emotions and symbols, the colour red, etc. (*Ibid.* 98–103), making people believe that Hitler was not a capitalist but a socialist — “the German Lenin” (*Ibid.* 99). According to Reich's sex-economic theory, if we would be able to eliminate sexual repression, then a social revolution would be possible: “Freed of its bonds and directed into the channels of the freedom movement's *rational goals*, the psychic energy of the average mass of people excited over a football game or laughing over a cheap musical would no longer be capable of being fettered” (*Ibid.* 32–3, my italics).

So, as Deleuze and Guattari note, there is in Reich a dualism between economic rationality and social responsibility on the one hand, and irrational desire, repressive ideology and phantasies on the other, where the former, rational objectives can be deceived through the latter (DG 2000: 38–9, 118–9, 257, 344–5 and Theweleit after them, 2003: 220). In this context, the task of psychoanalysis is to deal with psychic suffering and sexual repression, which would pave the way to social responsibility and freedom, the latter of which would require efforts of a different nature (notably Reich, 1970: 19). For Deleuze and Guattari, in contrast, “desiring-production is one and the same thing as social production” and “[i]t is not possible to attribute a special form of existence to desire, a mental or psychic reality that is presumably different from the material reality of social production” (DG 2000: 39). This is why, “[a]s opposed to Reich, schizoanalysis makes no distinction in nature between political economy and libidinal economy” (*Ibid.* 381). According to Deleuze and Guattari, there is only one desiring production, which is both psychic and social.

Because of this discrepancy, Deleuze and Guattari are not entirely satisfied with Reich's theory about the rise of fascism, which still implies that the people were deceived. We can add to this that, in Reich, it is not so clear how the masses could have been so unified, how the individuals could all have had exactly the same Oedipal and authoritarian desires and dispositions, and all have reacted to the authoritarian

patriarchy in the same way. Indeed, Reich's concept of "the structure of the masses" in its collective aspect, remains somewhat vague, as he transitions all too quickly from a specific "psychic structure" or "character structure" (Reich 1970: notably 14, 16, 18–9, see also Reich 1972 [1933]) — the unconscious framework of individuals that influences their behavior and dispositions — to "class structure" (*Ibid.* 49, 54, etc.) and "mass structure" (*Ibid.* 5, 20 34, etc.). The question arises whether this "mass structure" is merely the individual structure shared by the individuals forming these masses — each having the same configuration — or if the fact that this structure is collectively shared changes something within the individuals and participates in the formation and cohesion of the collective, and in what manner.

In their schizoanalysis, Deleuze and Guattari connect libidinal and political economy into a single framework. For them, Oedipal desire, and the related Lacanian definition of desire as lack (see notably Lacan 2006 [1966]: 680), is not the fundamental or universal form of desire, and also not a merely individual structure of psychic economy but inherently collective and socio-political. Indeed, this kind of desire is produced by social organisation and domination: "The deliberate creation of lack [...] is the art of a dominant class. This involves deliberately organizing wants and needs (*manque*) amid an abundance of production; making all of desire teeter and fall victim to the great fear of not having one's needs satisfied" (DG 2000: 28). In what follows, I will shed light on how the *socius* can produce this kind of desire by exploring Guattari's insights on two types of groups and group fantasies, which show that group fantasies can sometimes operate in a repressive manner, according to a cybernetic-like logic of totalisation.

Microfascism and Totalising Group Phantasies

As we have seen in the introduction, in Theweleit and Deleuze and Guattari's reflections on fascism, the identification with the leader — and thus the authoritarian structure or Oedipus — does not play such an important role. According to Deleuze and Guattari, Oedipus is merely a sham or a trap (DG 2000: 115–6): we do not really desire our mother before the incest prohibition and the Oedipal structure is imposed upon us (*Ibid.* 100–1, 113–7). Deleuze and Guattari thus denounce the psychoanalytic tendency to always interpret everything through Oedipus (*Ibid.* 14, 52–6, 100–1), which contributes to and maintains social repression, while pretending that it is merely individual, psychic repression. Accordingly, for them it seems more useful to look at fascism through an analysis of group organisation or functioning.

Theweleit's analyses confirm the idea that fascism would benefit from an analysis through the functioning of groups rather than through Oedipus. According to him, we cannot reduce or extrapolate fascist desire from this structure, that is, from a desire for an incestuous relation with the mother and from the fear of castration that would result from this. He writes:

For the men we are dealing with here, there is no such end. They want something other than incest, which is a relationship involving persons, names, and families. They want to wade in blood; they want an intoxicant that will “cause both sight and hearing to fade away.” They want a contact with the opposite sex — or perhaps simply access to sexuality itself — which cannot be *named*, a contact in which they can dissolve themselves while forcibly dissolving the other sex. They want to penetrate into its life, its warmth, its blood. It seems to me that they aren’t just more intemperate, dangerous, and cruel than Freud’s harmless “motherfucker” Oedipus; they are of an entirely other order. And if, in spite of everything, they have a desire for incest, it is, at the very least, with the earth itself (“Mother Earth”). They are far more likely to wish to penetrate “her” in some violent act of “incest,” to explode into and with her, than wish themselves in the beds of their flesh-and-blood mothers.

Here we are faced with something that cannot be subsumed under the heading of “Incest,” or the concept of “object relations.” What we have here is a desire for, and fear of, fusion, explosion. In parallel fashion, the fear of rifle women cannot (as we have begun to see) simply be reduced to the concept of “castration anxiety.” What we encounter instead is a fear of total annihilation and dismemberment (Theweleit 2003: 205).

As this passage indicates, for Theweleit, pre-Oedipal and pre-objectal relations seem more important in understanding fascism than the Oedipal structure. This makes sense if we consider that fascism must necessarily be a movement, a collective phenomenon or a group-phenomenon, and that this has been related to a pre-Oedipal position by the pioneering group dynamatician Bion (Bion 2004: 6, 90, 141–2, 1635, 181–9).

Indeed, according to Bion’s clinical observations, we should consider people’s behaviour in groups from the point of view of what Melanie Klein calls the pre-Oedipal and pre-genital, paranoid-schizoid position (Klein 1984a [1928, 1930]: 186–98, 233–5 and 1984b [1946]: 1–24), which she associates with infants and psychotics. According to Klein, this position is characterised by partial drives and objects, such as oral drives directed toward the mother’s breast, without perceiving the self or the mother as a whole person. This fragile, dissociated position generates feelings of frustration, hatred, anxiety, and persecution, and leads to defense mechanisms such as splitting (dividing objects and self into good and bad parts), the introjection of good objects and the projection of bad ones to external objects (hallucinatory gratification). In this mental phase or level, primitive fears and fantasies — such as

phantasies of destruction, ingestion, omnipotence, persecution, and mutilation — are prominent and not clearly distinguished from reality.

Bion notes that being in a group awakens such primitive fears and anxieties in us, and makes us regress into this pre-Oedipal position, with its phantasies and defence mechanisms, which determine how the group acts. François Tosquelles, the founder of institutional psychotherapy, who had a great influence on Guattari, follows Bion in this (see Guattari, Oury, Tosquelles et al. 1961: 85; Guattari, Oury and Tosquelles 1985: 82, 186–90). As we will see, Guattari also seems to agree with Bion, even though he also seems to find the latter's view limited, in the sense that Bion only describes what Guattari calls the “subjugated” or “dependent group” (Guattari 2015 [1972]). I will also focus on these latter here, and argue that we can associate them with microfascism.

Theweleit seems to agree with this focus on groups in an explanation of fascism, when he writes: “I part company with [...] one of the basic assumptions of all communist theories of fascism, including that of Wilhelm Reich [...] neither defensive fantasies nor paradigms for the transmutation of reality seem here to be class-specific” (Theweleit 2003: 89) and “Benjamin is right in saying that fascism may help the masses to express themselves, but that it certainly doesn't help them to gain their rights. We need to go one step further, though, and specify what is being expressed” (*Ibid.* 432). In one of his discussions of the fantasies of fascism and of what is being expressed in them, he mentions that we could ask whether they are the fantasies “of ‘groups,’ ‘classes,’ or ‘individuals’” (Theweleit 1996: 350). He notes that “[t]he most unlikely scenario is that a fantasy becomes the fantasy of an entire class [...] The fact that communist theoreticians have met with disaster in constructing a class consciousness should give us food for thought” (*Ibid.* note 6). He mentions Deleuze and Guattari, and also Sartre, who has influenced Guattari's distinction between two kinds of groups, as has often been noted in the literature (see notably Antonioli 2023, Caló 2023, Dubois 2021).

Sartre distinguishes between two kinds of groups in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Sartre 2004 [1960]: xxvi-xxx, *passim*). On the one hand, there is the series or seriality, which is characterised by passivity and inertia, and where “everyone is the same as the Others in so far as he is Other than himself” (*Ibid.* 260). He notably gives the examples of people listening to a radio broadcast (*Ibid.* 270–6), waiting for the bus (*Ibid.* 256–69), and of the economic market (*Ibid.* 277–92). On the other hand, there are groups in fusion, which Sartre associates with a common, revolutionary praxis. Here, “[t]he individual, as a third party, is connected, in the unity of a single *praxis* (and therefore of a single perceptual vista) with the unity of individuals as inseparable moments of a nontotalised totalisation” (*Ibid.* 374) and there is “a perpetual re-creation of *praxis* by the group” (*Ibid.* 298). He famously

gives the example of the storming of the Bastille (*Ibid.* 351–62).²

This distinction has inspired Guattari's own distinction between the subjected group and the subject-group (Guattari 2015: 64–8, 70–1, 77–9, 107, 118–9, 224–6, 230–1; Guattari also uses the terms dependent and independent group, or subject and object group), which he formulates in slightly different terms than Sartre's. For Guattari, the subjected group is defined externally; it follows a law or principle that it is subjected to from the outside. Because of this, it is unable to face alterity, nonsense, or its outside, and it does not tolerate change. This further makes it unable to be creative or therapeutic — or, in Guattari's terms, to have “access to desire” (*Ibid.* 68, 230). Guattari associates this with the psychoanalytic notions of castration and of the superego, as well as with stereotypical, empty, or banal utterances that are disconnected from the subject's desire (*Ibid.* 52). The subject-group, in contrast, is open and able to face alterity and its own finitude or ending. It is capable of change and able hear or to listen as well as to speak and to be heard. It is important to note that this is not an absolute distinction: these two dimensions are not mutually exclusive; they can both be present in the same group or a group can shift between them (*Ibid.* 77, 107).³

To achieve the emergence of a subject-group seems to be the aim of institutional analysis for Guattari. This has both a political and a therapeutic significance, and like Reich's theory and practice, institutional analysis has a Marxist or socio-economic as well as a Freudian or analytic dimension (see for example Guattari, Oury, Tosquelles et al. 1961: 11–4). It is also worth noting that, as a movement, institutional psychotherapy has a historical connection to resistance against fascism,

² It is interesting to note, with Fredric Jameson (in Sartre 2004: xxvii), that this points to an important difference between Sartre and Martin Heidegger, who was a member of Hitler's National Socialist party from 1933 onwards. Indeed, the conceptual distinction that Heidegger makes in relation to being-with-others between authenticity and inauthenticity (see notably Heidegger 1985 [1927]: 279–348) seems conservative — we could even say: fascist. This is because Heidegger associates authenticity with what he calls being-onto-death, as well as with conscience and duty. As such, this notion has a military ring to it, and it resonates with Reich's and Theweleit's descriptions of fascism. This is not at all the case for Sartre's distinction between seriality and groups in fusion, on the contrary: Sartre rather seems to associate seriality with the dominant classes, and we can associate the military to this concept of inauthentic, fallen or inert group-being, while the authentic and active group-in-fusion can be associated with a revolutionary *praxis*.

³ As Susana Caló remarks, an important difference between Sartre and Guattari is that Guattari believes the institution can be creative and take the form of a subject-group, while Sartre does not think that institutions can be in fusion (Caló 2023: 291). I would like to argue that there is another difference with Sartre: It seems that a common *praxis* is not sufficient for the emergence of a subject-group in Guattari's sense, because this does not preclude the presence of (unconscious) mechanisms of alienation, such as the formation of leaderships or the reification of roles (Guattari 2015: 77–8). For Guattari, these mechanisms indicate that the group is subjected, and therefore we should learn to decipher and avoid them. In other words, it seems to me that Guattari would find that in Sartre the analytic dimension is missing. Indeed, he writes: ‘Our concern is to determine the conditions that allow an institution to play an analytical role in the Freudian sense’ (*Ibid.* 124). This is related to the notion of group phantasy, which will be addressed in the following pages.

as its founder, Tosquelle, opposed the Francoist regime and then endeavoured to resist the Vichy regime.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the Oedipal structure and class ideology should not be seen as something primary or universal, because they depend on the existence of something more fundamental, namely the abovementioned subjugated or dependent group: “it is not the forms of the subjugated group that depend on Oedipal projections and identifications, but the reverse: it is Oedipal applications that depend on the determinations of the subjugated group” (DG 2000: 103). According to the authors, the subjected group determines the libidinal investments of its members — which influences for example their pursuit of a certain career, their buying of certain goods or adhering to certain values — and it creates a feeling of “indeed being one of us” or, in other words, “a *segregative use*” of desiring production (*Ibid.*). This view constitutes a reversal of Reich’s: Oedipus and class ideology depend on a segregative, nationalistic, religious, or racist sentiment, and not the reverse (*Ibid.* 104). This kind of segregative function of desire can further produce the feeling “of being part of a superior race threatened by enemies from outside” (*Ibid.* 103) — which is characteristic of fascism.

What is more, for Guattari, the organisation of a group has a lot to do with the imaginary. More precisely, it has to do with how group fantasies operate within the group.⁴ He indeed writes: “Organizing such a collective depends not only on the words that are said, but on *the formation of images underlying the constitution of any group, and these seem to me something fundamental — the support upon which all their other aims and objects rest*. I do not think one can fully grasp the acts, attitudes or inner life of any group without grasping the theematics and *functions* of its ‘acting out’ of phantasies” (Guattari 2015: 222; my emphasis). In the two volumes of *Male Fantasies*, Theweleit shows the importance of the content of fascist fantasies. However, the question *how* these fantasies could be so influential and be shared by the members of the fascist movement or ideology, and *how these fantasies operated* in relation to the collective dimension of this movement remains somewhat unclear. I hope to shed light on this through an analysis of Guattari’s concept of the group phantasy of the subjected group, which, I shall argue, functions according to a logic of cybernetic modulation.

Guattari — and Deleuze after him — distinguishes between two kinds of group phantasy or “[t]wo group functions of the imaginary” (Guattari 2015: 224), which

⁴ It is interesting to note that the concept of group fantasy constitutes an important distinction between Guattari’s thought and that of his lifelong colleague and friend Jean Oury, the psychiatrist who founded La Borde, and who was also an important figure in institutional psychotherapy. Indeed, Oury did not believe in the existence of group fantasies, just like he did not believe in the distinction that Guattari makes between subjected and subject-group (see Oury and Depussé 2003: 230). This points to a more profound disagreement between the two men, which has a lot to do with their assessment of the status of psychoanalysis and of Lacan, with Guattari being much more critical about these than Oury.

correspond to “two different readings of this identity [between desiring production and social production …] depending upon whether the desiring-machines are regarded from the point of view of the great gregarious masses that they form, or whether social machines are considered from the point of view of the elementary forces of desire that serve as a basis for them” (DG 2000: 30). In this context, it should be noted that according to Deleuze and Guattari, fantasy is always group fantasy, and never merely individual (*Ibid.*).

Guattari seems to associate the group fantasy of the subjected group to Bion’s “basic assumptions” (Bion 2004), as he calls them “phantasies of a *particular* group” or “*basic* phantasies” (Guattari 2015: 228; my italics), while distinguishing the object of institutional analysis, or the subject-group from this (*Ibid.* 226 note 11). Bion infers the idea of basic assumptions from his clinical practice with groups. These assumptions correspond to very basic kinds of groups, or to basic “categories of mental activity” of groups (Bion 2004: 172), which derive from the paranoid-schizoid or the “proto-mental” level (*Ibid.* 101–5, 154), and which correspond to unconscious presuppositions about the group that individuals belong to and what unites them. Bion distinguishes three such assumptions: First, the dependent group and the basic assumption that there is a person or object, inside or outside the group, which sustains the group and provides it security, protection, and nourishment, on the material or spiritual level (Bion 2004: 74, 147). This group depends on a leader, like a fragile and immature organism, and its leader may be a concrete, existing person or an ideal or spiritual object, like a deity. Secondly, there is the fight-flight group, which gathers around an enemy that it constantly must fight or run away from, in such a way that, in this kind of group, paranoid and aggressive feelings thrive (*Ibid.* 73, 152–3). In the third place, there is the pairing group, which creates occasions for intimate, dual relations. In this way, this group makes it possible to address individual problems and it creates a hopeful atmosphere based on the idea that intimate relations will solve neurotic problems and help settle feelings of guilt (*Ibid.* 72, 150–2).⁵

⁵ It is interesting to observe with Bion that, in our society, there seem to be specialised work groups that are devoted to dealing with problems of, and stimulating desires related to, the mentalities of the different basic assumption groups: the artificial groups that Freud describes (Freud 1949: 41–51), namely the Church and the Army, can be seen as responding, in an organised manner, respectively to the needs and anxieties of the dependent group and of the fight-flight group (Bion 2004: 136–7, 156–8, 167). Freud does not explicitly mention any artificial group that would accommodate the pairing group, but according to Bion this would be the role of psychoanalysis itself (*Ibid.* 167, 176). Indeed, psychoanalysis is characterised by an intimate, binary relation, a focus on libido and sexuality, and a hope of solving neurotic problems through this intimate relation. Bion further recognises in this kind of group a Messianic hope that should not be fulfilled (*Ibid.* 160–1, 187) — which is typical of Judeo-Christian religions — and he also associates it with the aristocracy, which ascribes great importance to marriage and reproduction (*Ibid.* 136, 158). We could also associate this with bourgeois culture, where marriage and reproduction are very important as well, notably because of the role they play in the conservation and allocation of property. This would be in line with Deleuze and Guattari’s considerations on psychoanalysis, when they emphasise

According to Bion, groups can switch from one basic assumption to another, for example when the tension becomes too high and another kind of basic assumption provides relief. Furthermore, these assumptions are not usually conveyed verbally but through gestures, sounds, postures, intonation, etc. (*Ibid.* 70, 83). In other words, they are shared through a more primitive level of communication, which can be quite subtle, and which often does not correspond to what is verbally or consciously communicated. In this context, Bion observes that it is hard to convey things to the group that the group does not want to entertain, and that the group reinterprets contributions to suit its desires. For example, in a fight-flight group, only inimical, aggressive or paranoid contributions, such as feelings of hatred and suspicion, are truly heard and accommodated by the group, while other kinds of contributions are not really taken into account. Accordingly, we can associate Bion's basic assumptions with the dependent group: these assumptions correspond to a phantasy that is shared by the members of a particular group, which is about the group in question and which determines its behaviour. Through this kind of group fantasy, the group becomes subordinate to its own collective imagination, which thus functions as a totalising mechanism of regulation.

Indeed, Guattari remarks that a group phantasy can function like “a kind of collective currency” (*Ibid.* 226; see also Guattari, Oury, Tosquelles et al. 1961: 137–56). This is the case for Bion's basic assumptions, given that they define the individuals' behaviour and expressions or, more precisely, what is of value for the group, thus leading the group to interpret everything in these terms. As a result, we can consider the group phantasy or basic assumption as a medium of cybernetic totalisation — following the computational logic related to information and data processing, which understands and designs systems with feedback and control mechanisms — as the following quote by Bion suggests: “Group mentality is the unanimous expression of the will of the group, contributed to by the individual in ways of which he is unaware, influencing him disagreeably whenever he thinks or behaves in a manner at variance with the basic assumptions. *It is thus a machinery of intercommunication that is designed to ensure that group life is in accordance with the basic assumptions*” (Bion 2004: 66; my emphasis). Guattari describes the functioning of the group phantasy of the subjected group in a similar fashion: he mentions “a specific operation of misrecognition, consisting in the production of a kind of false windows that are group phantasms” (Guattari 2015: 77–8; translation modified) and “specific systems of resistance, misreading” because of which “they [group fantasies] are the seat of an entire series of clashes and impasses between the individual and the group” (*Ibid.* 130–1).

its bourgeois conception of sexuality; its emphasis on guilt, neurotic problems, and the intimate family; and the role of money and of the contract in its therapeutic practice (DG 2000: 49–50, 56, 64).

Because of the way its group fantasy functions, the basic assumption group, just like Guattari's subjected group, is unable to face alterity or change. Indeed, Bion remarks that this kind of group cannot be creative or therapeutic, and that it reacts to new ideas like the psychotic individual reacts to external objects according to Klein (Bion 2004: 156-9, 164 note 2). Guattari emphasises that dependent groups have a "totalizing character" (Guattari 2015: 70), which is expressed through "an unconscious function of social regulation" (*Ibid.* 105). This function of regulation can be related to the castration complex and neurotic anxiety in front of the superego, for which it forms the basis. It procures its members a certain sense of the absolute or of eternity, which allows them to hide from desire and death, as well as from nonsense or alterity, which is experienced as external (*Ibid.* 79, 119, 231). However, this comes at the price of repression and domination, given that this kind of group functions through a logic of generality, where everything is considered equivalent to everything while difference is neglected (*Ibid.* 324-5), which makes this group unable to recognise the singularity of events or of individuals and their desires (*Ibid.* 68, 109, 115-6, 131, 230). According to Guattari, something like this happens in fascist regimes, where the leader does not *actually* possess total control, but where "imaginary phenomena of pseudo-fallicization" (*Ibid.* 105) reinforce this power.

We can associate these controlling and regulating group fantasies with Deleuze and Guattari's later concept of microfascism (notably Deleuze and Guattari 2005 [1980]), which is not explicitly present in *Anti-Oedipus* yet, but which according to Deleuze and Guattari "provides an answer to the global question: Why does desire desire its own repression, how can it desire its own repression?" (*Ibid.* 215).⁶ Indeed, the group fantasy of the subjected group indicates a mechanism by which desire comes to desire its own repression, through a cybernetic operation, which responds to desires of safety, belonging and segregation. Because of its repression of singularity, of what is different, in favour of an adherence to a certain group, we can call this function of the group fantasy microfascist, and we can call it proto-totalitarian because of its totalising logic.

It is interesting to note that Guattari associates Lacan's symbolic with this kind of cybernetic totalisation (Guattari 2015: 108). It is true that Lacan's notion of desire, which can only be accessed or expressed through the symbolic or through the Other, can be understood as cybernetic: Departing from and driven by an essential lack related to the object of desire, which is essentially unattainable, and a demand for love and recognition by the inaccessible Other, it constitutes a never-ending

⁶ We could say, however, that this concept is already implicit or prefigured in *Anti-Oedipus*. Indeed, the notion of subjected group is present here, which can be associated to the concept of microfascism. Furthermore, a notion of microfascism can be discerned in Foucault's preface to the book, where he writes: "the major enemy, the strategic adversary [of the book] is fascism [...] And not only historical fascism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini — which was able to mobilize and use the desire of the masses so effectively — but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us" (Foucault in DG 2000: xiii).

cycle, which continuously oscillates between these two, as a cybernetic circuit with feedback mechanisms (notably Lacan 2006: 6–48, 680–700). This explains why, according to Guattari, classical psychoanalysis is not useful to avoid this kind of totalisation, since “[a]nalytical interpretation [...] implies an exacerbation of this [totalising] procedure” (Guattari 2015: 71). From the perspective of schizoanalysis, desiring production does not necessarily operate in a cybernetic, totalising way: rather than being cybernetic, it is first and foremost machinic (Van der Wielen 2024), and the concepts of machinic desire, the subject-group, and transversality should be understood precisely as responding to — and indeed motivated by — the need to resist (micro-)fascism.

Deleuze and Guattari affirm that the proto-totalitarian microfascism of the subjected group is very difficult to fight, and that it is more dangerous and pervasive than molar fascism (notably *Ibid.* 215). This kind of fascism is omnipresent in everyday life and our relations to others, as a constant temptation to become our own little policeman: “individuals contain microfascisms just waiting to crystallize” (*Ibid.* 9–10), these “microfascisms have a specificity of their own [...] Instead of the great paranoid fear, we are trapped in a thousand little monomanias, self-evident truths, and clarities that gush from every black hole and no longer form a system, but are only rumble and buzz, blinding lights giving any and everybody the mission of self-appointed judge, dispenser of justice, policeman, neighbourhood SS man” (*Ibid.* 228). Deleuze and Guattari’s mention of the black hole suggests that microfascism functions like cybernetic modulation, as they criticise the totalising cybernetic logic in terms of the deployment of a white screen or overcoding of reality, to which we can associate the group fantasy, and a computing black hole through which things are selected and interpreted (*Ibid.* 179). In other words, it seems that according to the authors microfascism takes the form of numerous microfascist machines, which function according to a totalising, cybernetic logic, in which the group’s imaginary formations play a crucial role.

Apart from explaining how desire can desire its own repression, this mechanism also shows how Deleuze and Guattari can affirm that there is only one kind of desiring production, which is both sexual or psychic and socio-political in nature. This is evident when we look at the political significance that they ascribe to partial objects, that is, the pre-genital and pre-Oedipal drives and investments, which are not integrated into global persons. They write: “Drives and part-objects are neither stages on a genetic axis nor positions in a deep structure; they are political options for problems, they are entryways and exits, impasses the child lives out politically, in other words, with all the force of his or her desire” (*Ibid.* 13). As they note, these partial objects tend to become repressed through social codification, and this has both sexual and political significance. Any psychoanalytic interpretation that reduces these phenomena to stages in the development toward genital sexuality and

the Oedipus complex, or any theory that excludes them from the political sphere, contending that they are of a different nature — as Reich does — disregards their scio-political significance and undermines their revolutionary potential. This can also be considered repressive and microfascist.

But the question arises: how exactly does this concept of microfascism, of desire desiring its own repression, explain molar fascism? Even though we can understand why Deleuze and Guattari affirm that there is a continuity between this kind of microfascism and a full-blown or molar fascism, in the sense that the former can crystalise into latter, which additionnaly seems to imply the former, the two are different in nature and their precise relation remains unclear. At first sight, Bion's fight-flight group, which is united against an enemy, and his dependent group, which needs a leader, or a mixture of both, seem able to explain the main aspects of fascism. These strongly resonate with the aggressivity, the phantasms of war and destruction, and the brotherhood and “us against them” mentality portrayed by Theweleit, as well as with the relation to power and the role of the leader described by Reich. What is more, Theweleit's descriptions are in line with the Bion's idea that, on a basic level, groups respond to paranoid-schizoid fantasies and anxieties, notably the fear of disintegration.

However, despite these similarities and resonances, this does not seem sufficient to explain fascism: the group mechanisms that Bion and Guattari describe are expressed in much more subtle ways than full-blown fascist mouvements, and they mostly do not explicitly or verbally express their microfascist tendencies. Indeed, in both authors, these mechanisms seem to be mostly unconscious, and revealing them results from analytic interpretation. If Guattari associates the subject group with eternity, inertia, repetition and thus a kind of dead drive or eternal return of the same, this is not because there would be an explicit desire for death, but a logic of equivalence and of identity in the way in which the group and its members interpret and appreciate things. In other words, subjected groups do not necessarily imply an overt desire for repression and destruction, or a well-defined enemy at all, just like a sense of belonging and segregative desire does not necessarily go together with feelings of supremacy and hostility.

What is more, as Theweleit's descriptions show, the fascist imaginary indicates a different relation to power than Bion's fight-flight group: the authority of the leader does not derive from the fact that the masses would be helpless or weak, on the contrary, together with its hierarchy, organisation and war-waging, the power of the leader allows people to participate in this power and to exercise their compulsion for domination (Theweleit 1996: 368–73, 392, 406). According to Theweleit, this relation to authority does not stem from people's respect for and fear of their authoritarian fathers, but rather from a fear of becoming dependent on their families and on their ridiculous, weak fathers again, after the war, which provided interesting

conditions for many men — notably financially and in terms of their pride and self-esteem.

Becoming-Fascist as a Destructive Runaway Process

As a result, the category of the subjected group and the notion of microfascism seem insufficient to account for the emergence of something so aberrant and extreme as fascism on the molar level. This seems to be related to the problem formulated in the following passage:

the question remains: When does the abstract machine of faciality enter into play? When is it triggered? Take some simple examples: [...] the political power operating through the face of the leader (streamers, icons, and photographs), even in mass actions [...] It is not the individuality of the face that counts but *the efficacy of the ciphering [that is, computing] it makes possible* [...] This is an affair not of ideology but of economy and the organization of power (*pouvoir*) (DG 2005: 175; my emphasis).

Deleuze and Guattari add that a face is not necessary for all kinds of molar power formations, but that certain forms of power operate through a face or a leader. Especially interesting to us here is that the authors define the abstract machine of faciality, which explains how power can be structured around a (fascist) leader, as a computing process, which structures the economy and organisation of this power. This means that we can relate this process to cybernetics, just like the desire of the subjected group. Indeed, the authors expressly relate this to what they call the white wall/black hole structure, which is in turn related to the cybernetic structure: “the black hole/white wall system [...] produces faces according to the changeable combinations of its cogwheels” (*Ibid.* 168).

Deleuze and Guattari add that the product of this kind of process — for example what they call “faciality” (*Ibid.* 167–91), which is present in fascist power formations — does not resemble that which produces it. In David Lapoujade’s terms (Lapoujade 2017), it constitutes an “aberrant movement” — a deviation that, in cybernetic or computational terms, can be conceptualised as a runaway process. For Deleuze and Guattari, this kind of process is not necessarily negative, on the contrary, because it allows for change. In their own terms, “a line of flight [enables] one to blow apart strata, cut roots, and make new connections” (DG 2005: 15). However, according to them this kind of process nevertheless always risks turning into a destructive line of abolition or of death (notably *Ibid.* 229).⁷ In what follows, I will argue that

⁷ Given the importance of the theme of the line of flight in Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, this makes fascism still a major strategic enemy in this work, just like it was in *Anti-Oedipus* according to Foucault (see note 4, above).

the relation between microfascism and macrofascism should be understood as such a process, driven by positive feedback stemming notably from the content of propaganda, speeches, popular songs and literature, such as those that Theweleit describes, which amplify certain tendencies or functions that are already present in the existing machinery of the subjected groups. This perspective allows to account for how the abstract machine of power, its line of flight, can evolve into a destructive line of death and how different microfascisms, or a “multitude of black holes” can “become centralized” and come into “resonance” to “form a system” — a “great paranoid fear” (DG 2005: 228) or a full-blown, molar fascism.⁸

Theweleit describes the proto-fascist imaginary of what he calls the “soldier males” (Theweleit, 2003: 23) in the early 1900s, on the basis of diaries and memoirs of members of the *Freikorps* elite (*Ibid.* 3–18) — some of whom later became high-ranking Nazis (*Ibid.* 25) — noting that these writings resist usual interpretations of fascism. On the basis of these writings, Theweleit observes an ambiguous relation to love and to women: usually, there is kind of apathy or uninvolvement regarding the soldier writers’ wives — whose names are almost never mentioned — and an internal censoring in relation to everything sexual and affective (*Ibid.* 3–7). Love is portrayed as an abyss of pain and destruction (*Ibid.* 9–10), and the soldiers seem more afraid of love than of war (*Ibid.* 15). According to Theweleit, “[t]hose passages reveal strangely ambivalent emotions. They vacillate between intense interest and cool indifference, aggressiveness and veneration, hatred, anxiety, alienation, and desire” (*Ibid.* 24). The imagery that is used in relation to women and to sexuality is the same as the one that is used in relation to communism: an indecent, dirty stream — for communism: “the Red Flood” (*Ibid.* 16). In short, women and love appear as dirty and painful, and war seems more important than marriage and women in *Freikorps* literature. According to Theweleit’s interpretation, the impossibility of sexual intercourse with women is avenged or compensated through violence and killing (*Ibid.* 34–5).

In light of this aversion to women, Theweleit sets out to look for what these soldier males *do* love, on the basis of their writings:

- the German people, the fatherland
- the homeland soil, native village, native city
- the “greatcoat” (uniform)
- other men (comrades, superiors, subordinates)

⁸ In the same way that they do not accept an explanation of fascism that supposes two different kinds of production — sexual and economic, in Reich — Deleuze and Guattari are not satisfied with an explanation of the desire for death and destruction through the death drive, like in Freud or Freudianism. Indeed, for them an explanation must depart from one and the same plane of desiring production, without supposing an external, biological reality that would come out of nowhere to produce a desire for destruction (see Theweleit 2003: 221–4 and 1996: 278; DG 2000: 331–3 and 2005: 160, 229). “We are not invoking any kind of death drive. There are no internal drives in desire, only assemblages. Desire is always assembled; it is what the assemblage determines it to be” (DG 2005: 229).

- the troops, the parish, the community-of-blood among fellow countrymen
- weapons, hunting, fighting
- animals (especially horses) (*Ibid.* 61).

All of these elements have a military connotation, so we can see how this content prefigure fascism. As Theweleit notes, for these men, the possibility for love and sexuality is bound up with the faith of the nation, for example with the duty to be away at war or not (*Ibid.* 27–35). What is more, according to him, the male soldiers are characterised by the presence of a rigid anti-female armor (*Ibid.* 300–62): this armor creates a sharp boundary between inside and outside, it censors them and separates them from their affects — from the stream of desiring production —, creating more and more shame and embarrassment regarding these affective elements, as the boundary becomes increasingly more constricted. In the literature, imagery of walls and dams, which become disrupted by streams — notably streams of blood — are frequently associated with women (*Ibid.* 384–5). Theweleit notes that these images bear similarities to those found in later fascist literature (*Ibid.* 360–3; Theweleit mentions *German Workers' Poetry, 1910–1933*). While it is evident how this content prefigures fascism, where it leads to violent desires for the destruction of alien flows, and sheds light on the symbolism and imaginary it employs, this does not fully account for the intense violence and widespread success of this aberrant political movement. Indeed, these prefiguring elements must have been somehow amplified and communicated or shared with the masses.

Theweleit argues that “[t]he real problem is that [the male soldiers'] bodies cramp up when they try to feel pleasure; sweat breaks out where love should; [their] soft, erect members become unsatisfied bones; [their] desire to penetrate another person's body becomes a lethal act; and contact between two sets of skin, two bodies, produces tension, dirt, and death, instead of release, purification, and rebirth” (*Ibid.* 417). The distinction in this culture between male and female, or cleanliness and dirt, and the value or even obsession with the former, resonates with the idea of homogeneity that is implicitly present in the subjected group, reinforcing this affect and the need for a rigid and pure unity. What is more, according to Theweleit, the male soldier “found himself in a process of disintegration, dissolution, molecularization — a process that threatened to completely cancel him out as an entity, to attack the controlled coherence of his sense perceptions and explode it into an infinite number of mutually hostile particles” (*Ibid.* 427). This pre-Oedipal fear of disintegration corresponds to how one feels in a group according to Bion, which means that this would be intensified in groups of soldiers or masses of people, thus reinforcing the need for purity, for rigidity, and for an armor. We can interpret this through the idea of redundancy, where certain tendencies are reinforced or amplified because of a

resonance or positive feedback between them: here, the desire for purity and the fear of disintegration positively reinforce each other, thereby intensifying these affects and potentially producing a more rigid or unified system — unity between the collectivity of male soldiers — which in turn would amplify each male soldier's individual affects.

What is more, Theweleit distinguishes various periods within his materials. Prior to 1933, autobiographical content was more prevalent, whereas afterward, the dominant style shifts to that of the novel, introducing a new central figure: the national-socialist soldier hero (*Ibid.* 23). These narratives suggest that the male soldier had been striving for National Socialism since around 1920. However, Theweleit notes that before this literary development, the protagonists of the autobiographical writings were typically soldiers who took pride in their political ignorance, so that this national-socialist soldier was a literary invention. As a result, we can understand this new form of literature and this new hero as a kind of overcoding: the excessive or redundant encoding of information, which adds a layer of meaning, thus distorting the original message. In Deleuze and Guattari's terms, we can say that this makes the different black holes resonate, and in this case also the different subjects of dread and repugnance, in order to form a larger, paranoid fascist machine. Indeed, we have seen how dependent groups and their microfascisms produced "interactions without resonance" (DG 2005: 228). Just like the power that crystallises into a State, we here have "a global (not local) integration, a redundancy of resonance" and "an operation of the stratification of the territory" (*Ibid.* 433).⁹ Unlike in other kinds of State, what resonates in producing the fascist national-socialist State are not positive and open territorial elements, like the economies of cities or different cultural variations for example, but the dark, black holes or microfascisms of subjected groups and individuals.

Indeed, we can even say that fascism manages to celebrate repression and make it enjoyable. As Theweleit notes, in its mass rituals or mass art (Theweleit 2003: 429–32), "fascism translates internal states into massive, external monuments or ornaments as a canalization system, which large numbers of people flow into" (*Ibid.* 431). In its red parades, fascism represents and celebrates how the streams or flows of desire have been repressed. Participating in them is thrilling, and means both participating in the expression of desire and in its repression and canalisation into rigid formations. In Theweleit's terms, "the scenario of the parade abolishe[s] the contradiction between the desiring-production of the individual and the demands of social power" and, in this way, "fascism translates internal states into massive, external monuments or ornaments as a canalization system, which large numbers of

⁹ Deleuze and Guattari note that this is not a necessity inherent to human collectives, and that Claude Levi-Strauss and Pierre Clastres have shown that so-called primitive societies can ward off both the emergence of a State and of a territory that is stratified into agricultural territories and cities for example (DG 2005: 429–3).

people flow into" (*Ibid.* 431). This type of mass event is incredibly exhilarating and fulfilling, especially for individuals who have been living in isolation, within their body armor, under social constraints, and with a fear of dissolution which inhibits desire, as described above. It induces a trance-like state and a sense of liberation, while following rigid patterns. We could say that such an event enacts the subjected group, while intensifying its uniting and segregative value and sentiments.

In a similar way, Theweleit remarks that Hitler was able to use in his speeches what was present in the psychic and sexual states of men, in order to express "the whole configuration of existence as a 'man among men,' in a form appropriate to his time, namely fascism" (Theweleit 1996: 413). This is also expressed in the short but ubiquitous phrase "*Heil!*": "[t]he word they repeatedly scream at the party congress is 'whole' — heil, heil, heil, heil, heil — and this is precisely what the party makes them. They are no longer broken; and they will remain whole into infinity. Eternal life takes place in the here-and-now... really and truly" (*Ibid.* 412). All individuals, all the *loci* of repression resonate together in these ritualised expressions as well as the rigid power formations of the fascist State, creating a massive fascist war machine: "every fascism is defined by a micro-black hole that stands on its own and communicates with the others, before resonating in a great, generalized central black hole. There is fascism when a war machine is installed in each hole, in every niche" (DG 2005: 214). In other words, positive feedback and resonance amplify existing microfascist elements, to produce a subjected group "to the n^{th} power" (to adopt the formulation of Deleuze, notably DG 2000: 311) — a line of flight. But this is not all, the reinforcement of the homogenising, segregative and repressive aspects of this kind of group also makes this line of flight turn into a true, fascist "line of active destruction or abolition" (DG 2005: 135; see also 230–1, 285, 422–3), "a line of death" (*Ibid.* 229, 285), or an annihilating "great, generalized central black hole" (*Ibid.* 214).

Indeed, the intense and almost sacred expressions of mass rituals emerge as one of the only means of satisfying desire — together with war and destruction. We have seen that the proto-fascist imaginary placed great emphasis on cleanliness and purity in contrast to dirt. This idea became associated both to the individual and the nation, producing different kinds of impurity in the imaginary: sexuality, affectivity, women, the masses, communism, commingling, racial impurity, etc. (Theweleit 2003: 386–429). This aversion becomes a violent repression and desire for destruction, in such a way that "pleasure is taken in violating whatever displays itself as living" (*Ibid.* 422) — both in oneself and in others. This is manifested in the different types of "dirt" that were present in concentration camps, which were so numerous that they incited a project of classification by ex-*Freikorps* Nazist Rudolf Höss (Theweleit 2003: 383–4), as well as in the idea of a State whose role is to fight any kind of impurity that could soil it (*Ibid.* 398).

Theweleit shows how this idea of violent repression on different levels is reinforced through texts, songs and propaganda — notably by Alfred Ernst Rosenberg and Dietrich Eckart — and how it finds expression in different violent acts and representations of them (Theweleit 1996). Suffice it so say that the material that he analyses manifests the “refusal by fascism to relinquish desire”, while also showing how desire takes “the form of a demand that ‘blood must flow,’ desire in its most profound distortion” (*Ibid.* 189, see also 427-8). This is in line with what Deleuze and Guattari affirm regarding Nazi statements, which according to them “always contain the ‘stupid and repugnant’ cry, *Long live death!*” (DG 2005: 231). War and destruction are the only option left for desire because all its possible ways of satisfaction have been blocked, repressed, prohibited. What is more, the repression that happens on the individual level on its desiring production or partial objects is reinforced by the fascist collectivity or the mass, which also sees violence and repression as its only way of persisting. In Theweleit’s terms: “War and war only can set a goal for mass movements on the largest scale while respecting their molar, antirevolutionary character” and “[o]nly war makes it possible to mobilize all human psychic forces while maintaining existing types of human beings” (*Ibid.* 201, see also 411).

This is exactly *the* danger of the line of flight, according to Deleuze and Guattari: “the line of flight crossing the wall, getting out of the black holes, but instead of connecting with other lines and each time augmenting its valence, *turning to destruction, abolition pure and simple, the passion of abolition*” (DG 2005: 229, see also 197, 200, 205–6) or “instead of opening up the deterritorialized assemblage onto something else, it may produce an effect of closure, as if the aggregate had fallen into and continues to spin in a kind of black hole” (*Ibid.* 333–4). When this happens, change or becoming develop into death and destruction or, in Deleuze and Guattari’s words, “the war machine has reached the point that it has no other object but war [...] it substitutes destruction for mutation [...] and] no longer draws mutant lines of flight, but a pure, cold line of abolition” (*Ibid.* 230). The authors add that this happens when a deterritorialising movement happens too fast or too suddenly, or under precocious conditions and when productive paths are blocked — this is indeed what happened in German fascism, which emerged at a time when the cultural and socio-economic conditions were dire, where the imaginary world of a majority of men fostered repression and violence.

According to Theweleit, however, this kind of phenomenon does not depend only on particular socio-political or historical conditions, on a particular political regime, and even not a specific pole of the political spectrum (Theweleit 1996: 418). For Deleuze and Guattari we should distinguish this from the totalitarian regime, which according to them only arises on the molar macropolitical level, as a State with rigid segmentarity and a particular mode of centralisation and totalisation (DG 2005: 214). In contrast to this, fascism is already present on the molecular level, which a

fascist State can rely on and make resonate in its destructive war machine. We could say the same of fascist leaders as well as movements or other organisations, even when they are not States, which makes fascism especially dangerous and pervasive, because of its supple, molecular nature. Indeed, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, “if Hitler took power, rather than taking over the German State administration, it was because from the beginning he had at his disposal microorganizations giving him ‘an unequaled, irreplaceable ability to penetrate every cell of society,’ in other words, a molecular and supple segmentarity, flows capable of suffusing every kind of cell” and “[e]ven after the National Socialist State had been established, microfascisms persisted that gave it unequaled ability to act upon the ‘masses’” (*Ibid.*).

Deleuze and Guattari compare fascism to a cancerous body: “What makes fascism dangerous is its molecular or micropolitical power, for it is a mass movement: a cancerous body rather than a totalitarian organism” (*Ibid.* 215; for the precise relation between the concept of the cancerous body and the different kinds of lines that Deleuze and Guattari elaborate in *A Thousand Plateaus*, see Protevi 2000). The cancerous proliferation of microfascist black holes prepares the way for the destructive line of flight of molar fascism as a mass mouvement and political regime. What is more, given that it constitutes the main danger pertaining to the line of flight, the risk of the emergence of the fascist war machine is always there when there is a (desire for) change or a revolutionary will.¹⁰ But what exactly causes microfascism to escalate into molar fascism, into a line of abolition causing a sudden destratification? I have argued that this progression should be understood in cybernetic terms, as a runaway process driven by redundancies and positive feedback loops that culminate in an aberrant line of abolition and abrupt destratification. The desire of the subjected group — which, like Lacan’s desire originates from lack, is related to castration, and functions cybernetically — is amplified and intensified by the perception that society, others, and desire are deficient — lacking order, purity, wholeness — as well as by literature and collective rituals that confirm and intensify this perception and the desire of subjected group — which desires homogeneity and eternity — thus creating a self-reinforcing positive feedback loop and an aberrant, fascist desire for destruction.

Conclusion: Dissipating Phantasms

In this article, I have tried to show how the imagination operates in fascism, through the thought of Deleuze and Guattari and Theweleit. I have first addressed Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of Reich, who explains the rise of fascism through the idea of a deception of the masses, and who seems to consider socio-economic and psycho-sexual production as two very different realities. In contrast to this, Deleuze

¹⁰ This idea is already central to Guattari’s early work, *Psychoanalysis and Transversality*, where one of the main preoccupations is how emancipatory or liberating movements tend to turn into the opposite of what they aspire to be to become microfascist subjected group (see Laberge 2024).

and Guattari consider these two as belonging to one and the same economy of desiring production, which equally produces economic production relations, power formations, and fantasies (DG 2000: 39). In this way, their thought has the potential to be able to account for the emergence of different forms of fascism immanently. Following Theweleit, I have focused on the role of imaginary formations — more precisely of fantasies. Relying on Bion's notion of basic assumption, I have offered a cybernetic interpretation of the functioning of the group fantasy of the microfascist subjected groups, as well as of the relation between microfascism and macrofascism. Motivated by the notions of the line of flight of deterritorialisation, I have interpreted the aberrant development of the microfascist subjected groups into a full-blown, molar fascism as a runaway process, fed notably by elements that speak to the imagination and that amplify certain functions and aspects of the existing subject groups and their group fantasies.

This interpretation again confirms (see notably Protevi 2000: 186–7) the importance that Deleuze and Guattari ascribe to micropolitics, or to the politics of our everyday relations and our relation to ourselves, given that microfascisms constitute the perfect breeding ground for molar fascism as a mass movement. This article also shows the importance of the analytic dimension, because of the role fantasies play, both on the micro- and on the macro level. Indeed, an important aspect of the response to the question, “what can be done to prevent the theme of a race from turning into a racism, a dominant and all-encompassing fascism, or into a sect and a folklore, microfascisms?” (DG 2005: 379), would be that we need to look at the economy of our (group) fantasies. As we have seen, according to Deleuze and Guattari, fantasy is always group fantasy, but these can be considered from two different angles: on the one hand, the relation between a fantasy and the constitution of subjected group or gregarious masses, on the other hand, their elementary and partial, machinic and transversal aspect, and their possible connections and bifurcations. As Guattari argues, a therapeutic or revolutionary subject-group cannot be “bogged down at the level of the imaginary” or a “prisoner of its own phantasies” (Guattari 2015: 224). In short, resistance against fascism would require that we constantly rearrange our group phantasies, that we dissipate the totalising and repressive ones, in order to foster “the emergence of independent groups capable of controlling their own fantasizing sufficiently to restrict it to transitional phantasies — phantasies whose historical limitation is recognized” (Guattari 2015: 258).

By relating the emergence of molar fascism to a cybernetic runaway process, this perspective highlights certain mechanisms that we can look out for, notably the emergence of redundancies and positive feedback, which can amplify existing tendencies, producing aberrant developments. It also shows the importance of the question whether a process is able to branch out or if it is closing in upon itself, potentially turning into a line of abolition. This seems especially important today because we are constantly fed all kinds of content notably by social media — but

not only — which, moreover, is picked out for us by algorithms, which already tend to exacerbate or amplify individual tendencies. Additionally, for many people the huge amount of time spent in front of screens limits the possibility of other types of experiences — or influences and even determines them — thus potentially constituting a movement of closure. Here, the questions arise: What is amplified through certain uses of media or mass events? Are there sufficient connections or are all pathways blocked, so that this could turn into line of destruction and death?

I hope this article will contribute to our theoretical analyses of and practices of resistance to fascism today, as both fascism and male fantasies are thriving again, notably in the growing online manosphere (notably Sugiura 2021), which provides a space for the expression and amplification of (misogynist) male imaginaries. As the reader may have noticed, Theweleit's analyses strongly resonate with certain phenomena that we can observe today in the manosphere. Just like in the (proto-) fascist writings that Theweleit analyses, the — very mediatised — contemporary masculine imaginary, which has been linked by researchers to far-right and fascist ideologies, features muscular bodies (see Farrell-Molloy 2022, Lubarda 2024, Tebaldi 2024, Tebaldi and Burnett 2024) — bodies that are ready to fight for the good and the purity of the race and civilization. Just like in the German (proto-)fascist imaginary, this imaginary features a conservative return to nature and tradition, and an ideal of purity (see Wodak 2021, Tebaldi 2023a and 2023b, Tebaldi and Burnett 2024), as well as a Darwinist dimension of biological determinism, for example in the so-called Red Pill community, who believes that men are biologically superior and that if one is going to lead a life of (involuntary) celibacy is determined by looks and genetics (Vallerga and Zurbriggen 2022, Van Valkenburgh 2018). Just like the male fantasies that led to fascism in Germany in the last century, this imaginary, and notably the red pill ideology and the notion of involuntary celibate (incel), leads to a misogynist attitude, to violence against women, and even in some desperate cases to self-destruction (Kelly, DiBranco and De Cook 2021: 19–20). Finally, male loneliness (notably Botha and Bower 2024, Cox 2021, Reeves 2022), which has been characterised as an epidemic, resonates with Theweleit's description of men cutting themselves off from pleasure and desire, associating love with suffering and preferring violence to romantic feelings.

It thus seems that we here have a cancerous body, a multiplicity of microfascist communities and organisations, which form the perfect breeding ground for a molar fascist power formation according to Deleuze and Guattari. Digital technologies and realms like the manosphere further constitute perfect tools to create redundancies, to amplify the elements that are present in subjected communities, and to make these different black holes resonate. All of this shows the urgency of the question how molar fascist formations emerge on the basis of microfascisms, and the importance of experimenting with practices of resistance, in order to forestall the rise of this kind of aberrant movement of sudden, destructive destratification.

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