

Jan Kunkel
caps
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Text by Sebastjan Brank

WHAT CAN LITTLE GIRL MARX TEACH US ABOUT THE PLEASURES OF DISAPPOINTMENT?

Gallons of ink have been spilled over Jean-François Lyotard's notorious 1974 book *Libidinal Economy*—a cynical, circuitous text, later renounced by its own author. For Lyotard, people are not merely libidinally invested in their own oppression (a relatively uncontroversial claim for any reader of psychoanalysis), but—and this is the cynical part—every resistance to this oppression is a self-serving, jouissance-excreting act of cathartic release, generating the socially necessary, and thus neutered transgression required by the very system. Resistance, according to this logic, is associated exclusively with masturbatory pleasure, or a compulsion to feel something, rather than a belief in building a better, more just world. But do libidinal intensities—those narcissistic, rewarding stimuli flowing through subjects as they resist—truly obliterate the claims of political struggle to diminish oppression? Doesn't the irresolvable conundrum of resistance become interesting precisely because the narcissistically libidinal and the pathology-free political are always inseparably intertwined?

In the chapter “The Desire Named Marx,” Lyotard's Marx is presented as a chimeric figure, bifurcated into two genders. First, there is the “big fat Marx” of the hermeneutics of suspicion, the doctrinaire philosopher of grand truths, the daddy of historical materialism, the rational and scientific analyst of capitalism's contradictions. Then there is “the little girl Marx of Epicurean and Lutheran studies,” a pulsating, voraciously receptive Marx marked by epistemic lack—never knowing enough, forever insatiable, sacrificed on the altar of heteronomy. Lyotard writes: “These two are not separate: the Old Man is also a young woman to us, a strange bisexual assemblage.”¹

Little Girl Marx is endlessly rewriting, adding, changing, revising, footnoting, scraping, elaborating, and masochistically subjecting herself to the Other's demands. Thus, her gender is not a matter of identity but of desire: she enjoys existing in a submissive relationship to her theoretical matrix, perpetually undone by its inconsistencies. The more she knows, the more she is frustrated by the gaps in her knowledge. Much like the superego: the subject's piousness and diligence are directly proportional to this psychic agency's ruthless aggression.

Little Girl Marx is scandalized by the flows of capital, fearful of its “polymorphous perversity” and its whimsical nature. She seeks to eliminate this perversity to fulfill her desire for a unified theory of capital—a centralized overview, a non-fractured completion, a kind of genital supremacy. Yet, she continually fails. There is always something that exceeds her attempts to theoretically capture capitalism; the genital stage of properly normative sexuality remains out of reach, the “perverse fluxes” of capital keep slipping away, eluding her grasp. Little Girl Marx keeps rewriting, perpetually postponing the completion of Capital, remaining trapped in “the interminable theoretical suspense,” addicted to the “discharge in postponement.”²

Here, the distinction between the rational Enlightenment accumulation of knowledge and libidinal investment comes to a screeching halt. Melanie Klein termed this the “epistemophilic instinct”³: the erotics of knowledge accumulation, the will to omniscience. The little girl's “perverse intensity of knowledge” is subjected to prolonged release—or to its complete withholding. She is never able to complete her work on Capital, perpetually edged by the very system she meticulously exposes as violent—a quintessential neurotic, akin to Hamlet, who cannot act on his desire because fulfilling it would mean confronting the loss of his attachment to an unrealized fantasy. Little Girl Marx's pleasure lies in endless deferral, along with the inherent disappointment of the theoretical object of investigation and the peculiar pleasure that this disappointment affords.

Andrea Long Chu characterizes disappointment as following:

*Disappointment is not how it feels when the object of your attachment fails to give you what you want; rather, disappointment is how it feels when you fail to detach yourself from the disappointing object. You ought to break up, but you don't. What's disappointing, in other words, is your own optimism: your continued belief in the world's being enough for the desires that tether you to it, all evidence to the contrary.*⁴

The Little Girl Marx, then, is perpetually disappointed. Yet, the scandal lies not only in the fact that she derives pleasure from this disappointment—much like Freudian resistances and symptoms—but also in her deep investment in critiquing the very system to which she remains cruelly attached. Her optimism ensures she will never attain what she desires, yet she persists in trying. This suggests a kind of negative determination at work: her entire theoretical project is founded on the attempt to abolish something she cannot live without.⁵

Perhaps, then, the lesson of Little Girl Marx lies not in her failure to finish but in her inability (refusal?) to stop trying—a testament to the paradox of desire itself. For in the endless deferral of completion, in the perpetual dance with disappointment, she reveals a truth both unsettling and liberating: that the pursuit of knowledge, like the pursuit of justice, is not a destination but a condition of being. After all, to be disappointed is not to be defeated; it is to remain tethered to the world, however imperfectly.

References

¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 96.

² Ibid, p. 98.

³ Jennifer Kunst, *Got Curiosity?*, Psychology Today, August 2012, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/a-headshrinkers-guide-to-the-galaxy/201208/got-curiosity>.

⁴ Andrea Long Chu, *The Impossibility of Feminism*, differences 30, no. 1 (2019), pp. 63–81.

⁵ This is, again, a cynical perspective. But another angle from which the figure of Little Girl Marx becomes compelling is her relinquishment of “manhood”—an affront to patriarchy (why would anyone do that?). It is Leo Bersani who best theorized the pleasurable relinquishment of power by those who possess it, *without necessarily subverting, or reclaiming, that power*: “Perhaps inherent in the very exercise of power is the temptation of its renunciation.” Emerging from Lyotard’s edgelord-y nihilism, Little Girl Marx can thus also be interpreted as a universal symptom of the sexual renunciation of power. This reading teases out what is merely implicit in Marx compared to another giant of modernity, Freud, who makes revisions central to his project. Writes Mikko Tuhkanen: “From the beginning, Freud exhibits a remarkable willingness to “lose himself” in “blocked but productive speculation” about pleasure, masochism, sublimation, and so forth. Rather than learning his lesson from early blunders, he compulsively repeats the failure, as if relishing the pleasure of having his arguments veer out of authorial control. This is what makes reading Freud a little bit like having sex or experiencing art.”

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Jan Kunkel works with language, objects, and their dissimulation. Closely invested in challenging notions of monographic authorship, she elicits sensory gaps where image production becomes an integral part of the pictorial material and its (semiotic) surfaces. Through both collaborative initiatives and solo practice, Jan focuses on the intricacies between performance/procurement, with particular attention to the material conditions underpinning scenarios of infrastructural critique. Recent exhibitions and performances include Kunstverein München, Munich (2023); Studiengalerie 1.357, Frankfurt (2023); and di volta in volta, Paris (2024).

Linda O. Elsner is a performer and actress. She has worked with renowned artists such as SIGNA, Autumn Knight, LTwill, and Nils Amadeus Lange, while also pursuing her own independent projects. Currently an ensemble member at Schauspiel Dortmund, Elsner’s recent lead role is as ‘Antigone’ (2025).

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Figure 22 Milan Kunc, *Penetration of the Dialectic (Young East European Lovers in the Caribbean for the First Time)*, 1992, oil on canvas, 140 × 150 cm. Collection of Václav Havel.

Jan Kunkel *caps* will be on view at Avenue Jean Volders 24, Brussels, from February 15 – March 16, 2025. The gallery is open on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays from 13:00 to 18:00, or by appointment. For additional information, please contact au JUS at +32 493 43 44 24 or contact_aujus@proton.me.