

# “When Does the Next Swan Depart?": Cynical Repetition, or the Shadow of Enlightenment

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CASSANDRA GUAN

Once upon a time in Vienna, the famous Austrian tenor Leo Slezak broke the spell of high Wagnerian mythos during a production of *Lohengrin*. The titular hero in this Romantic opera, a mystery knight who cannot disclose his name, appears dramatically at the end of Act I in a magical boat drawn by a white swan. Summoned to the aid of a falsely accused woman by her fervent prayers, the Swan Knight, as he is known, will be betrayed in due course by the curiosity of the damsel he delivers, and ultimately compelled to return to the land of the Holy Grail without her. On the night in question, a bereft Lohengrin, after beguiling the rapt audience with the tragic aria “*Mein lieber Schwan! Ach, diese letzte, traur'ge Fahrt...*” (My beloved swan! Ah this last tragic journey...), turned around to embark on his final voyage—only to discover that a careless assistant had sent his swan craft gliding off stage ahead of schedule. Watching the feathery conveyance vanishing into the wings, the stranded singer ad-libbed, “When will the next swan depart?” (*Wann fährt der nächste Schwan?*).

Slezak’s flash of wit illuminates the reactionary form of consciousness that prevailed in the wake of the 2024 US presidential election. In a December podcast, the *New York Times* op-ed columnist Carlos Lozada opined that “the Trump era has officially been renewed and extended—for a new season.”<sup>1</sup> The flippancy of this characterization left an acid taste in my memory. In the run-up to the general election, the public at large was told ad nauseum by liberal pundits in the media that a second Trump administration would pose an unparalleled threat to American democracy. Then, with a degree of casualness that I, for one, did not anticipate, the same savants blandly dismissed the outcome of the election as not much to see, treating

the right-wing seizure of the US government as a new season of reality TV. As with the bungling of Lohengrin's dramatic exit, the ideological catchphrase that cushioned the blow of the Democrats' defeat at the polls consists of what Hegel would call a bad infinity: that is, the degradation of an absolutely singular or transcendent event to the endless repetition of an identical interval. Like Slezak, the Biden administration assumed the role of a providential knight in shining armor entrusted to deliver liberal democracy from its enemies, only to fall comically short at the critical moment, and then with a good humored shrug, simply cast aside the hero's mask. "For a President who considers Trump a fascist and has warned about the horrors of mass deportation," Jonathan Blitzer reports in *The New Yorker*, "the atmosphere of Biden's White House has struck several people I spoke with as curiously sedate."<sup>2</sup> In the blink of an eye, the magical swan barge has become a pedestrian swan bus.

Still packing a punch, the joke of catching the next swan boat effectively indicts a form of consciousness that Peter Sloterdijk, in *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983), calls postmodern cynicism. According to Sloterdijk, the postmodern cynic is a subject who has nullified the critical operation of ideology critique by internalizing the form of enlightened self-consciousness without allowing it to affect his actions.<sup>3</sup> Whereas the traditional subject of ideology operates according to the logic that Karl Marx in the opening chapter of *Das Kapital* calls "they do not know it, but they are doing it" (*Sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es*), the postmodern cynic knows only too well what he is doing, and yet does it all the same. Cynicism, as a postmodern ideology, renders the critique of false consciousness ineffectual since subjects who are already aware of what they are doing cannot be enlightened. From this perspective, we may perceive Slezak's self-mockery to be a symptom of the condition of voluntary self-alienation that Sloterdijk calls "enlightened false consciousness." By letting the mask of the hero drop in public, the actor communicates a cynical knowledge of the real conditions of his imaginary being. Before reaching this conclusion, however, it is worth noting that Sloterdijk's critique of cynical reason distinguishes the postmodern condition of enlightened false consciousness from the classical philosophy of *Kynicism*.

The original Kynic, Diogenes of Sinope, was a practical philosopher who subverted the norms and precepts of civilization through a kind of acid, Rabelaisian humor. In contrast to other philosophies of the Hellenistic world, the Kynics eschews intellectual queries for an obscene bodily praxis, encapsulated in the story of Diogenes' reply to the emperor Alexander when the

latter condescended to inquire what he could do for the homeless philosopher: “Get out of my sun!” Mobilizing plebian irony and *ad hominum* attacks, the shirtless Kynics went about defying social conventions and exposing the artificiality and hypocrisy of ruling class ideology. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek argues that the postmodern form of cynicism identified by Sloterdijk is “the answer of the ruling culture to this kynical subversion: it recognizes, it takes into account, the particular interest behind the ideological universality, the distance between the ideological mask and the reality, but it still finds reasons to retain the mask.”<sup>4</sup>

A basic issue with any critique of cynicism, then, is clarifying the meaning of this term in relation to two historically distinct praxes: the classical aim of the Kynics to subvert the legitimate social order with critical satire and the postmodern ruse that inoculates the Enlightenment critique of ideology with a flippant form of self-consciousness. In this framework, Slezak’s irreverent query, translated into English by his son Walter as “what time is the next swan?” strikes me as an expression of kynical subversion rather than cynical conformity.<sup>5</sup> As a critical operation, the comedic gesture of laying bare the device, i.e. raising consciousness of the technical mechanisms that support the fictional diegesis, is strongly reminiscent of the Brechtian concept of alienation (*Verfremdung*). It exposes to wit the Wagnerian mythos of originality and redemption enshrined in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a Romantic fantasy covering over the debased realities of industrial society. This is what Hegelians would call negation of the negation.

Unlike the Diogenes of the Vienna State Opera, the career politician of today knows all too well that his quest for public office is neither sacred nor *sui generis*. Left behind by the swan boat of history, this self-appointed Lohengrin lacks the penetration and humor to parody his own position. Consequently, we have to judge them by their actions rather than their words. For example, while framing the 2024 election as the Thermopylae of American democracy, the reluctance of prominent Democrats to hold an open primary or compete for their party’s nomination tells us that they never believed in the gravity of the hour. These knights of pale and noble countenance who brandish their unbroken lances have secretly resigned themselves to waiting for the next swan boat.

What can we learn from this comparison as far as cynicism is concerned? Clearly, the ancient and postmodern praxes are not variants in a continuous ethical tradition. Superseded by Stoicism, Kynicism became a relic to most modern philosophers.<sup>6</sup> It did not occur to anyone to emulate the Kynics in

their way of life until Sloterdijk revived interest in their antics with his criticism of postmodern cynicism. In light of this delayed reception, I think we have to first theorize the historical break that separates the object of Sloterdijk's critique from the practical philosophy of *Kynicism* before we can uphold the latter as an oppositional mode of being. To this end, I will venture in the second half of this essay to reevaluate the power of kynical subversion in the face of the historical rupture that is the revolution of consciousness otherwise known as the Enlightenment. Just as the Kynics rejected the *nomos* of Hellenistic society, opening up an *excentric* line of flight out of its official worldview, so postmodern cynicism as a reactionary cultural phenomenon cannot be understood apart from the form of consciousness unique to modernity, that is, one characterized by the belief in progress, in reason, and in the improvability of human nature. Ultimately, I would like to suggest that by framing the question of cynicism strictly in terms of ideology, Sloterdijk, Žižek and other theorists of postmodernity have broadly neglected the relation of the subject to time.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, one could argue that modernity itself—I mean a certain kind of temporal self-consciousness that took definite form in the European Enlightenment—involves a critique of cynicism *avant la lettre*.<sup>8</sup> Nowhere is this revolt of Consciousness against the constraints of societal norms more clearly articulated than by Kant in his 1784 essay “What is the Enlightenment?” For Kant, enlightenment (*Aufklärung*), or “the human being's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity,” is brought about by individual members of society through the free and public use of reason.<sup>9</sup> He proscribes no positive destination for humanity, no telos of development, asserting only the categorical imperative: “Have the courage to use your own intellect!”<sup>10</sup> Individuals thus enjoined must learn to think for themselves but do so in a public forum. If successful, they contribute to the general state of enlightenment, which in turn advances the freedom of thought and expression for all necessary to further enlightenment. Kant warns that no one can bestow the fruits of enlightenment upon others, for such unearned knowledge will impede rather than facilitate the intellectual development of the masses.<sup>11</sup> By the same token, a society cannot, without violating human nature, bind itself to a set of truths once and for all, but must keep its knowledge provisional and allow succeeding generations to participate in the general work of self-emancipation.<sup>12</sup>

Enlightenment, in effect, is contingent on an article of faith: that human *beings* exist in an open-ended configuration of time and that human society

can be improved through the free and public use of reason. This means the view of time forged in the European Enlightenment is fundamentally different from the providential belief that history bends toward revelation. Defying the classical figure of destiny, Kant's vision of enlightenment proceeds from the first principle that human nature comprises an incalculable measure. Freedom, the indeterminacy that characterizes human being, constitutes for Kant the sole basis of that potential for self-emancipation that he calls enlightenment, an endeavor complicated by an equally human propensity to conform to norms. In calling on his contemporaries to think for themselves, Kant aspires to overcome the external and self-imposed limitations upon human nature through the autonomous use of human reason. The radical form of his proposal breaks with the cyclical temporality of traditional societies and inaugurates a revolutionary trajectory of development (the criticism of the left is that this process unfolds only in the domain of consciousness). Setting modern societies on the path of self-emancipation, "What Is Enlightenment?" divides history into two halves: henceforth the new will stand apart from the old, rejecting its tyrannical claims, while human actions may yield their meaning only in relation to the social norms that human beings themselves generate. Liberated from tradition, humanity will realize its freedom in the permanent revolution of Consciousness.

Cynicism appears at this juncture to arrest the temporality of the Enlightenment. To each and every assertion of radical change its representative responds with skepticism and disbelief. Those who listen attentively to the chorus of modernity can make out the cynic's subdued voice amidst the earnest proclamations of idealists and the fervent outcries of revolutionaries. Like the world-weary donkey from George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the cynic quietly repeats, "a donkey lives a long time," meaning by this cryptic refrain, "Haven't we seen it all before? Aren't revolutionary ruptures only pageantry for the naïve? Doesn't each new order simply reinstate the same old social relations?" In effect, the subject disillusioned with modernity maintains that nothing really changes beneath fluctuating appearances, or even that change itself has become a necessary fiction for things to remain secretly the same, as Prince Don Fabrizio of Salina from Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's great *Risorgimento* novel *The Leopard* memorably asserted.<sup>13</sup> This form of consciousness does not belong to the Hellenistic world because the classical view of time was essentially cyclical. History in the modern sense of a radical rupture with the past is the real object of cynical resistance, which explains the repudiation of genuine change that organizes the cynic's discourse.

In other words, modern cynicism is a reactionary form of consciousness that ameliorates the anxiety and anomie unleashed by the epistemological and social upheavals of modernity. In Luchino Visconti's superb adaptation of *The Leopard*, the character of Don Fabrizio, played by Burt Lancaster, forgets himself in front of a canvas by the 18th-century French painter Jean-Baptiste Greuze. Before the depiction of a patriarch dying amidst his distraught family, the prince muses out loud whether his own death will resemble the depicted scene. He concludes that minus a few details "it will be more or less the same." As I see it, this enigmatic pronouncement amounts to a denial of the singularity of each life and consequently the genuine catastrophe that is death. Adopting this psychological line of defense, Don Fabrizio, a representative of the decadent nobility, is able to confront his own mortality and the irrevocable decline of his estate with equanimity. Through a subtly edited sequence of shot-reverse shots, Visconti implies that the enlightened Sicilian aristocrat in the country's belated transition from feudalism to capitalism is able to make peace with the inevitability of social change only by disavowing its reality. In an immobilized icon depicting the ravages of time, this subject perceives the eternal repetition of an identical event. From behind his shoulders, as it were, the film asks at what cost comes the reassuring knowledge of permanence. How melancholic does one have to be to deny the reality of loss and forfeit the possibility of new beginning? Training our attention on the way Lancaster's character simultaneously recognizes and misrecognizes his own role in a changing world, *The Leopard* puts into jeopardy the relationship of the subject to a historical mode of temporality that we call modernity. It's as if the paragon of cynicism in modern literature and cinema saw for the first time the shadow cast by the light of Enlightenment.

To speak of cynicism in these terms is to look beyond the phenomenon of individual consciousness. The resonance of Slezak's quip with the obscene logic that underlies our current political reality has critical import only insofar as they both illustrate the cynical desire to domesticate change. Initially, the comparison appears to reinforce the prevailing image of cynicism in postmodern theory: as a relationship of depth and surface. One could thus caricature the Kynic as someone who says the quiet part out loud to the consternation of the hypocrite, while imagining the cynic as a hypocrite who knowingly undercuts the possibility of kynical subversion through a form of enlightened false consciousness. But something important is occluded in this telling. As Žižek points out, a curious cleavage runs through

Kant's pamphlet on the enlightenment.<sup>14</sup>

Addressing himself to none other than Frederic the Great, the author of "What Is the Enlightenment?" draws a strict partition between the freedom of public discourse and the practical ethics of private action. Far from endorsing the modern view that "the personal is political," Kant offers the following guideline to his reader: "Argue as much as you like and about what you like, but obey!"<sup>15</sup> According to this admirer of enlightened Prussian monarchy, what the subject does in his capacity as a private individual and social functionary *should* be different from what he advocates for in the public realm. As citizens, we have to exercise our freedom of speech before the assembly of our fellow citizens, but in private life we need to abide by the laws of family, church, and state. The line dividing public and a private forms of consciousness points to an internal site of repression reminiscent of the widely perceived cynicism of those who "talk the talk but don't walk the walk." In upshot, it turns out that the Kantian conception of enlightenment is *already* cynical in the way of Sloterdijk's enlightened false consciousness. Cynicism was not a bug but a feature of the radical freedom of Consciousness that can only be obtained through the splitting of the subject into a public and a private self and the submission of the latter to societal norms.

It should be clearer now that the tendency to diagnose cynicism as a symptom of postmodernity overlooks its co-constitution with the modern form of consciousness. For this reason, the cynic is more at home in the sanctums of modernity than we have been hitherto willing to acknowledge. Far from being an enemy of enlightenment, this overdetermined figure has played midwife to its radical form of temporal consciousness. His is a discourse that reconciles the revolutionary violence of modernity with the preservation of identity. When Slezak demoted the swan boat to swan bus through the single adverb "next," his quip shows us not the eclipse of the Enlightenment but its disillusionment. "Next" means a bad infinity of repetition without difference. Consequently, it has become the favorite utterance of those who, bracing themselves against the powerful storm blowing from paradise, to invoke Walter Benjamin's cynical vision of progress, wish to avert the possibility of irreversible change. Echoing Shakespeare's Macbeth, the defeated political actors can mechanically intone, "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow..." all the while taking assurance in the invariability of the liberal form of government and the date of the next US presidential election. Clinging to the administrative procedures of change, these ineffectual Lohengrins mollify themselves with the fantasy that politics and history

would “creep on in this petty pace from day to day” until, presumably, “the last syllable of recorded time.” While history is serialized into reality TV, the would-be defenders of liberal democracy have this much to offer: the next swan boat, when it comes, will run on time. Or so they believe.

**Cassandra Guan** is Assistant Professor in Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago. Her previous writing has appeared in *Screen*, *October*, and *Film-Philosophy*, and she is completing a book entitled *Maladaptive Media: The Plasticity of Life in the Era of Its Technical Reproducibility*.

#### NOTES

1. Carlos Lozada, Michelle Cottle, and Ross Douthat, “The Highbrow and Lowbrow of the Trump Era,” *New York Times*, 6 December 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/06/opinion/trump-culture-era.html>

2. Jonathan Blitzer, “The Immigrants Most Vulnerable to Trump’s Mass Deportation Plans Entered the Country Legally,” *New Yorker*, 5 December 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-lede/the-immigrants-most-vulnerable-to-trumps-mass-deportation-plans-entered-the-country-legally?>

3. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, translated by Michael Eldred (University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

4. *Ibid.*, 5.

5. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso Books, 1989), 29.

6. Walter Slezak, *What Time Is the Next Swan?* (Doubleday & Company, 1962), 54-57.

7. On the dismissal of cynicism by modern philosophers such as Hegel, see William H. Barnes, *A Critique of Liberal Cynicism: Peter Sloterdijk, Judith Butler, and Critical Liberalism* (Lexington Books, 2022), 1.

8. Some scholars who have theorized the relation between cynicism and postmodernity after Sloterdijk and Žižek include Iain Chambers, *Border Dialogues: Journeys in Postmodernity* (Routledge, 1990); Timothy Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (Verso, 1997); and Barnes, *A Critique of Liberal Cynicism*.

9. Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is the Enlightenment?” in *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, trans. by David L. Colclasure (Yale University Press, 1992), 17.

10. *Ibid.*, 17.

11. *Ibid.*, 18.

12. *Ibid.*, 20.

13. The prince’s exact words are “For things to remain the same, everything must change.”

14. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 29-30. The issue of Kant’s apparent cynicism is also discussed in Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (Routledge, 2001), p. ix-x

15. Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” 19.