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Cynicism in Grant Sputore's I Am Mother**

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## **‘I Am (big) M(Other)’: Lacan’s big Other and the Role of Cynicism in Grant Sputore’s *I Am Mother***

Jack Black

### *Preliminary Remarks*

After the opening credits of Netflix’s, *I Am Mother*<sup>1</sup> – from which it is made clear that humans are now extinct – we observe a short montage where a robotic Mother (voiced by Rose Bryne and performed by Luke Hawker) selects an embryo and subsequently raises a young girl, named Daughter (Clara Rugaard). From these opening sequences, we watch Mother cradle the baby as well as coaxing Daughter to sleep by singing the lullaby, *Baby Mine* (originally used in Disney’s *Dumbo*<sup>2</sup>) and we observe the child learn to walk, with later scenes displaying Daughter’s interest in ballet. It is clear, from the on-screen affections between robot and human, that we are watching a loving mother-daughter relation. After the opening sequences, the girl, now a teenager, continues to live alone with Mother in a bunker, cut-off from the outside world. She’s told never to go outside due to contamination.

Notably, the film touches upon a number of significant topics, including technological advancement, performed through the threat of artificial intelligence; potential ecological disaster, while referred to as the ‘wasteland’ it is clear that the world outside the bunker has suffered some form of ecological catastrophe; and, an underlying nature-nurture contention, played-out in Daughter’s sheltered upbringing. In fact, while Daughter is clearly well-cared for in the bunker, over the course of the film she is regularly subjected to exams by Mother, who also serves as her educational tutor. These exams test Daughter’s cognitive development as well as Mother’s ‘mothering’ ability. Nevertheless, it is set against the aforementioned debates, most notably, the potential benefits that artificial intelligence can bring to our current ecological predicaments, that the importance of Lacan’s notion of the big Other and its relation to the subject can be used to shed light on the film’s ambiguous ending.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, this ambiguity is brought to bear when the family arrangement between Mother and Daughter is disrupted. After hearing a pounding on the bunker door, Daughter allows a woman to enter the bunker (the character is referred to as ‘Woman’ throughout the film and is played by Hilary Swank). Clearly injured, Mother and Daughter treat the Woman, who is subsequently confined to the bunker in order to recover. After a number of incidences, it is evident that the Woman is clearly frightened

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<sup>1</sup> *I Am Mother*. Directed by Grant Sputore. Netflix, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> *Dumbo*. Directed by Ben Sharpsteen. RKO Radio Pictures, 1941.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-55*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Sylvana Tomaselli (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991).

by Mother. Woman tries to shoot the robot and continues to tell Daughter that she shouldn't trust Mother. Outside the bunker, she explains how humans are hunted by robots, all of whom look exactly like Mother. In hiding from the robots, the Woman details how she lives in a mine with other humans and subsequently encourages Daughter to escape the bunker with her.

By this point it is clear that Daughter remains torn between her robotic Mother, who informs her that the Woman is lying and shouldn't be trusted, and the possibility of the Woman allowing her to meet and live with other human beings; a dilemma that mimics the ethical conundrums that were played-out in an early classroom scene, where we watch Mother tutor Daughter on ethical principles (we learn Daughter has recently been subject to learning Kant). Before escaping the bunker with Woman, Daughter is rewarded for completing one of her exams: Mother allows Daughter to select an embryo – a 'brother' for whom the two shall raise together in the bunker.

However, Daughter's subsequent escape is aided by the sudden and traumatic realization that she is in fact not the first embryo selected by Mother – but the third. Daughter discovers the remains of another child in an incinerator, leaving the audience to question the montage at the start of the film: did the montage depict our current Daughter or another earlier attempt by Mother to raise a human, killed because she didn't meet the standards set by Mother's tests?

After escaping the bunker, Daughter realizes that Woman has lied to her. She does not live in mines with other human beings, but in a container, on a beach and on her own. Upon realizing this, Daughter immediately returns to the bunker to save her brother. During their escape from the bunker, both Daughter and Woman realize that the machines in the wasteland have started to grow crops, giving the impression that some form of life is returning.

## 2. The Big Other

For Lacan, the big Other is that immaterial, non-psychological agency which registers our position and those of others (when we meet someone new, we shake hands: the shaking of hands is what registers the greeting for the big Other).<sup>4</sup> The big Other is what records and guarantees social authority; it is that which confers one's position in society. Consequently, while the big Other is intersubjective, with its authority presupposed and maintained as long as subjects act 'as if' it exists, the symbolic efficiency of the big Other is structured around its own fundamental lack, indeed, its own non-existence. Accordingly, while Lacan encourages us to acknowledge that the big Other does not exist, it remains a necessary illusion and a repository of the social values, customs and ideas that inevitably structure our societies.<sup>5</sup>

In the case of *I Am Mother*, it is Mother who holds this position of the big Other, with the materiality of the robotic frame serving as the machine which brings to bear the ideals of motherhood to the symbolic order on-screen. However, in the film, this ideal is

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 235-247.

<sup>5</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London, UK: Karnac Books, 2015), 346.

confronted when Daughter returns to the bunker, gun in hand, and pleads with Mother to let her raise her Brother alone. In fact, the confrontation reveals much more. It becomes clear that Mother is some form of artificial intelligence, controlling the planet through the various robots outside. As a form of ‘hive mind’, she does not solely encapsulate the robotic machine that has raised Daughter from birth but, instead, occupies the position of a transcendental, God-like being, supervising what is left of the planet. It is revealed that Mother was built in order to help humans be the best they can be, and it is hinted that she was the one who caused humanity’s extinction so as to raise a ‘better’ human – yes, other daughters may have been killed, but this was all on the path to creating the Daughter we now see. After putting her ethical knowledge to the test, Daughter convinces Mother that she is competent enough to raise her brother alone and that she doesn’t need Mother’s guidance nor will she make the mistakes of previous humans. Mother accepts, and in a final symbolic gesture, Daughter shoots Mother, disabling the robotic interface that she inhabits.



Woman (Hilary Swank), Daughter (Clara Rugaard) and Mother (Rose Byrne) in *I Am Mother* (dir. Grant Sputore, 2019)

As a result, it would seem that, upon her return to the bunker, there is no ambiguity in Daughter’s desire to convince Mother that she can raise her Brother alone. Here, Daughter’s decision serves more as a compromise to Mother’s demand. In fact, rather than highlighting Mother’s flaws, disabling her and then leaving for the world outside, we instead realize that there is no capacity to kill Mother. As a form of artificial intelligence, which transcends any material robotic frame, she exists immaterially. When Daughter destroys the robotic interface that Mother inhabits, Mother is not killed but rather continues to exist as a transcendental being. In sum, she is excess, existing everywhere, but nowhere.

Such a realization serves to confine Daughter to Mother’s plan and, ultimately, to Mother’s desire to raise a better, more ethical human. In this sense, Mother’s letter arrives at its destination: Daughter’s ability to fulfil Mother’s Ego Ideal occurs not through her own self-realization (a realization of the transposed lack between subject and big Other), but by becoming and being the ethical human that Mother’s plan sought to establish. Daughter’s actions do not dispel Mother nor do they provide the realization

that, as big Other, Mother is incomplete, lacking and founded on imposture; but, rather, serve to confirm Daughter's interpellation.

Furthermore, if we consider the preceding arrival of Woman and, specifically, her possession of a book, which contains illustrations of other humans drawn by the Woman, then it is clear that the role of the book functions as Daughter's *objet petit a* (*objet a*): it is the *object cause of desire* for Daughter – 'that which sets our desire in motion, in the sense of the formal frame which confers consistency on our desire'.<sup>6</sup> Here, the book of illustrations (*objet a*) encapsulates the hesitancy which questions Mother's symbolic authority and, as a consequence, serves to objectify Daughter's desire to go beyond the bunker and defy Mother's command – it is *something* that reveals knowledge of a life 'beyond' the big Other ('Mother').

More importantly, we discover that in fact Woman occupies an abject position in the world outside the bunker, and the book's illustrations – the real humans to which they correspond – do not exist. Woman is deliberately excluded and, as a result, serves to support Mother's ideological significance. This is revealed in one of the film's final scenes, where, after being killed in the bunker, Mother inhabits another robotic body and visits the Woman who is holed-up in her container. Here, Mother asks the Woman why she cannot remember her parents and why, when everyone else is dead, she has been able to survive. It is in accordance with these questions that we realise that in fact Woman has been allowed to survive *because* of Mother and that her own attempts to convince Daughter to leave the bunker were part of Mother's plan to 'test' whether Daughter would return to the bunker to raise her brother. It is also implied that the Woman may have in fact been one of the earlier daughters raised by Mother (perhaps, the young girl we watched in the opening montage?).

To this end, rather than occupying a position of exclusion, outside the hegemonic ideology, Woman's included-exclusion is dialectically performed via her role in Mother's 'bigger plan'. Even the Woman's hatred for the machines is controlled and managed by Mother, and when considering the book of human illustrations (*objet a*), it is apparent that Daughter's desire has remained beholden to the desire of Mother – Daughter *is* the 'frame' to Mother's (the Other's) desire from whom Daughter's transgression has been conditioned all along.<sup>7</sup> Corresponding with Lacan's contention that the unconscious permits a discourse that belongs to the Other – the unconscious is not located 'deep' within the individual, somewhere 'behind' the conscious – our relation to the big Other exemplifies how the subject's desire *is* the desire of the Other. That is, the subject's desire is both provoked and prevented by the Other.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London, UK: Verso, 2008), 53.

<sup>7</sup> Notably, Daughter is not present to witness this moment of revelation. At the end of the scene, we watch Mother close the container door, with the impression given that Woman is killed.

<sup>8</sup> Mladan Dolar, 'One Divides into Two,' *e-flux* 33 (2012): 4.

It is in this sense that the film's end serves to consolidate Daughter's interpellation.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Daughter's killing of Mother could have been interpreted as a Lacanian Act: a new ethical gesture that radically reconstitutes the symbolic field along new coordinates, outside of Mother's control.<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, we could interpret this gesture as the subject (Daughter) acknowledging the big Other's (Mother's) lack. This does not result in the subject overcoming the big Other, but instead relies upon achieving some form of symbolic consistency *with* the big Other; often through an acknowledgment of the subject's fantasy ('traversing the fantasy'). It is in this sense that subjective destitution involves the subject's realization that there is no big Other; indeed, there is no authority behind the scenes, which gives meaning to the subject's existence.<sup>11</sup>

Certainly, there are moments of trauma for Daughter which suggest the potential for such a (self-)realization. The discovery that Mother had incinerated a previous human and the realization that Woman lied to her (there are no other humans) offer two examples. In the case of the latter, one can imagine an obverse situation where the realization of actual human beings, living beyond the bunker, could in fact be a traumatic experience – a realization of Daughter's fantasy and a final confirmation of the lies and coercion that Mother has placed her on. What is significant in these scenes, however, is how strangely un-traumatic they seem to be for Daughter. Though Daughter does, upon finding the incinerated bones of former humans, fall back in horror, aghast at what she has learnt; she, nevertheless, undergoes no realization that she could have very easily have ended the same way, if it were not for her competent test results. Whereas the scene accurately portrays the contingency of Daughter's existence – a realization which gives Daughter's story a retroactive significance – in the film's narrative this is generally passed-over, serving merely as an encouragement for Daughter to act on 'her' desire and escape the bunker. Equally, when escaping the bunker and realizing that the Woman has lied, Daughter returns with a rejuvenated sense of purpose; primarily, that she can continue Mother's plan. It is this latter act which bears particular significance, and which suggests a more ambiguous conclusion to the film's end.

Indeed, rather than acknowledging the inconsistency of Mother's plan and subsequently the inconsistencies of the big Other (bearing in mind that Mother seems to be aware of these inconsistencies, acknowledging throughout the film that her own progress as a Mother is something that she is working on), Daughter accepts her

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<sup>9</sup> In the work of Althusser, interpellation denotes a process of ideological subjectivization. That is, through forms of address, the ideology of social and political institutions serves to position the subject's identity via social interaction. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London, UK: Verso, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Event: A Philosophical Journey Through a Concept* (New York, NY: Melville House, 2014), 168-9.

<sup>11</sup> Such acknowledgement can be seen in the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, where, for Žižek, the disaster helped to expose the inherent impotency of the Soviet system: that the power of the big Other (the Soviet State) was ultimately powerless in the face of nuclear catastrophe (Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 36-7).

interpellation, embodying this plan in full. Instead of realizing that ‘the big Other is not some kind of substantial Master who secretly pulls the strings but a stumbling malfunctioning machinery’ – a literal machine in this case – Daughter embraces her symbolic fiction and her position as a mere test of Mother’s desire to raise an ethical human in order to reach her full potential.<sup>12</sup> As a result, Daughter fulfills Mother’s plan entirely.

### 3. Daughter’s alienation

This is brought to bear in the film’s final scene when it is clear that Daughter has now adopted the position of ‘mother’, cradling her baby Brother and singing the ‘Baby Mine’ lullaby that Mother originally sung to her as a child. The presentation of the scene and its depiction of Daughter’s self-estrangement is essential. Indeed, whereas at first, we watch Daughter sing the lullaby to the child, eventually Daughter’s singing transfers to the film’s soundtrack, with Daughter standing up and looking directly at the camera, her mouth evidently closed. The significance of the voice in this scene is confirmed by the fact that it is Daughter and *her* voice which is left imitating Mother’s singing. Accordingly, the effect of the transference from Daughter to soundtrack is important: while the transference could be interpreted as a reflection of Daughter’s subjectivity, it is in fact *Daughter’s version* of the lullaby (her ‘voice’) which transfers to the film’s soundtrack (as opposed to the original ‘Mother’ version being used). If it had been Mother’s singing which was used, then at least we could confer some form of subjective separation between Daughter and Mother (big Other).

Instead, it is Daughter’s transference which compounds her resigned alienation and the final establishment of Mother as big Other. As evident in Žižek’s analysis of a similar scene from the film *A Woman’s Way*,<sup>13</sup> the character ‘Strella’ (Mina Orfanou) would often imitate the singing of Maria Callas by performing in transvestite clubs. Yet, in one of the final scenes, following the film’s reconciliation, it is Callas’s singing which can be heard offscreen. As Žižek notes, ‘Strella has no longer to imitate the singing of Callas – at the end, *she accepts her alienation*: the voice doesn’t have to be yours, instead of you imitating the Other, you accept the Other in its otherness’.<sup>14</sup> The major difference between each film is that while, in *A Woman’s Way*, Strella performs a certain dis-alienation, a separation founded on her non-imitation; in the case of *I Am Mother*, it is Daughter who continues to imitate Mother’s singing. The reference to alienation here is one that draws upon Lacan’s alienation-separation dialectic in the formation of the subject.<sup>15</sup>

Daughter’s alienation is further supported when we consider that rather than leave the confines of the bunker and live ‘outside’, it is suggested that Daughter has chosen to

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<sup>12</sup> Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, 21

<sup>13</sup> Žižek, *Event*, 166-9; see also *A Women’s Way* (Strella). Directed by Panos H. Koutras. Memento Films, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Žižek, *Event*, 182, fn. 130, italics added.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Verhaeghe, ‘Lacan’s Answer to Alienation: Separation,’ *Crisis and Critique* 6, no. 1 (2019), 370-380.

remain within the bunker she has grown-up in. To this extent, the bunker obtains a utopian function; a fantasy from which Daughter can raise her Brother, screening them from the wasteland beyond. It is here that Daughter's predicament reveals 'the fundamental ambiguity of the notion of fantasy', with Žižek explaining that 'while fantasy is the screen that protects us from the encounter with the Real, fantasy itself, at its most fundamental ... cannot ever be subjectivised, and has to remain repressed in order to function'.<sup>16</sup> To this extent, despite Daughter 'killing' the Mother machine, we can view Daughter's actions as a perversion that simply reinstates Mother's Symbolic importance. The significance of this failure is that it neatly reflects upon our current ecological malaise.

In part, we can attribute this malaise to a sense of Symbolic impotency that characterises life under postmodern, late-capitalism.<sup>17</sup> No longer tied to the 'meta-narratives' of the past, the subject is without Master, instead free to pursue a individuality beholden to them. But, as Žižek inquires, 'What ... happens in the situation of the decline of the Master, when the subject himself is constantly bombarded with the request to give a sign as to what he wants?'.<sup>18</sup> Contrary to the subject's freedom, we are left with mere semblance:

It is when there is no one here to tell you what you really want, when all the burden of the choice is on you, that the big Other dominates you completely, and the choice effectively disappears, i.e., is replaced by its mere semblance.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4. The significance of the semblance

The significance of this 'semblance' bears a notable comparison to Mother's role in the film's conclusion. For example, though it is clear that Daughter's appropriation of the role of 'mother' affords her a certain substance in the Symbolic order, one grounded in her appropriation of the 'Mother' signifier, such 'authority' remains tied to Mother's position as *the* big Other. While no longer existing as a mechanic entity, Mother is sublimated into a 'metaphor of ... prohibition'.<sup>20</sup> As the Other, Mother maintains her position as 'the Symbolic locus of the Law': that is, a 'Law, in all its incarnate forms, [which] enables the subject to continue desiring, rather than undergoing the traumatic destitution that would result from a full apprehension of the inherent deadlock of the libidinal economy'.<sup>21</sup> It is in this sense that we can locate Daughter's desire in relation to M(Other). Note the following from Ruti:

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<sup>16</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London, UK: Granta Books, 2006), 59.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Flisfeder, 'Postmodern Marxism Today: Jameson, Žižek, and the Demise of Symbolic Efficiency,' *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 12, no. 1 (2019), 28.

<sup>18</sup> Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies*, 198.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>20</sup> Adrian Johnston, 'The Vicious Circle of the Super-Ego: The Pathological Trap of Guilt and the Beginning of Ethics,' *Psychoanalytic Studies* 3, no. 3/4 (2001), 417.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 417.

Lacan ... suggests that when the subject is estranged from her desire – when she allows herself to be overrun by the desire of the Other – her existence feels empty, apathetic, and devoid of meaning; when in the throes of such life-deadening conformity, the subject goes through the motions of life in a defensive manner, sacrificing the integrity of her desire for the convenience of an easily classifiable social identity.<sup>22</sup>

By the film's end, it is clear that Daughter's convenience is underscored by her adoption of the 'easily classifiable social identity' – Mother – and her apathetic resignation.

This 'impotence' remains a reoccurring motif in cinematic depictions that merely perpetuate a level of conservatism concerned more with upholding liberal democracy.<sup>23</sup> Take Wansbrough's account of the villain Thanos (Josh Brolin) from Marvel's *Avengers* series, whereupon Thanos's intention to drastically cull half of all life within the universe remains a 'deeply conservative' position.<sup>24</sup> Essentially, Thanos's position presents 'no underlying change to economic structures or even the consumption of resources', and, thus, simply maintains the liberal political order. Instead, 'the ethical demand is placed on us: we need to learn to live within our means.'<sup>25</sup>

These demands remain tied to a logic of desire that simply reasserts the far more pervasive imposition of Mother's Symbolic authority. It is this imposition that renders Daughter's location within the bunker as one grounded in a cynical detachment. This is supported by the fact that while remaining well-cared for in the bunker (it provides all the basic necessities for living, along with many additional benefits from its technological advances), the running of the planet is left to Mother: it is Mother who controls the various robotic apparatuses that toil away at the land outside and it is Mother who has started to grow crops in the wasteland. Importantly, there is no dis-alienation on behalf of Daughter, from which her own sense of lack could be recognized in the big Other (Mother), providing the acknowledgement that 'there is no big Other'; instead, she fully accepts her impotency, forged through the literal distance that she cynically creates between herself and Mother (it can be presumed that Mother will remain outside the bunker, leaving Daughter to fulfil her role). It is this 'distance' which ultimately maintains her ideological interpellation.

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<sup>22</sup> Mari Ruit, 'The Fall of Fantasies: A Lacanian Reading of Lack,' *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 56, no. 2 (2008), 503.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative* (Ropley, UK: 0 Books, 2009), 21.

<sup>24</sup> *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. Directed by Joss Whedon. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2015; *Avengers: Infinity War*. Directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2018; *Avengers: Endgame*. Directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2019; Aleksandr Andreas Wansbrough, 'Political Representation in Slavoj Žižek's Antigone and Marvel Studio's Black Panther by Slavoj Žižek (review),' *Journal of Asia-Pacific Pop Culture* 3, no. 2 (2018), 349.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

### Final comments

The importance of Daughter's predicament is significant, especially in light of our current political and ecological contradictions. In many ways, the Mother we are left with at the end of the film presents a recasting of Nature in accordance with what McKenzie Wark refers to as a literal Mother ('Mother Nature') – taking care of the planet and nature all on its own and, presumably, maintaining nature's balance without the hubris of human activity.<sup>26</sup> To this end, while Daughter accepts her predicament, ensuring that she will be the one to raise her Brother, she nonetheless resorts to a form of cynicism that maintains her relation to Mother (big Other).

By casting Mother from the bunker, Daughter inevitably remains attached to a big Other who, beyond the bunker, is able to 'pull the stings' and manage what we can presume to be the re-fertilization of the planet. Consequently, while Daughter can continue living in the bunker, cynically distrusting Mother's overall plan, she nonetheless achieves a level of detachment that further consolidates her ideological attachment to Mother. What Daughter inevitably prevents, therefore, is that 'traumatic confrontation with the big Other's ultimate impotence and imposture'.<sup>27</sup> Instead, Daughter cynically performs the fetishistic disavowal which remains constitutive of our ideological predicament: from 'I know very well, but nonetheless...', to 'I know very well that Mother has incinerated humans and pervasively tested me, but nonetheless it's better than living out there in the wasteland...'.<sup>28</sup>

As a result, the film accurately portrays and stands for our current political and ideological malaise. From Brexit to Trump, it is clear that the decline in the big Other has resulted in forms of political frustration that center on a desire to 'take back control'.<sup>28</sup> While such political apathy and cynicism is directed towards the inability of governments to meet these demands, at the same time, we remain plagued by an ecological predicament that shows similar signs of cynical detachment. Though remaining well-aware of the calls from climate research and protest groups, such efforts only serve to tie us to a deeper sense of impotence and impasse.

To this end, perhaps the efforts of Mother are an accurate portrayal of our desire for a new big Other? One that can maintain the planet, while we remain holed-up in our fantasy bunkers.

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<sup>26</sup> McKenzie Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene* (London, UK: Verso, 2015), 248, 238.

<sup>27</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 235.

<sup>28</sup> Jack Black, 'From mood to movement: English nationalism, the European Union and taking back control,' *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 32, no. 2 (2019).

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