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The Field of Business Sustainability and the Death Drive: A Radical Intervention

Alan Bradshaw · Detlev Zwick

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Abstract We argue that the gap between an authentically ethical conviction of sustainability and a behaviour that avoids confronting the terrifying reality of its ethical point of reference is characteristic of the field of business sustainability. We do not accuse the field of business sustainability of ethical shortcomings on the account of this attitude–behaviour gap. If anything, we claim the opposite, namely that there resides an ethical sincerity in the convictions of business scholars to entrust capitalism and capitalists with the mammoth task of reversing, the terrifying reality of ecological devastation. Yet, the very illusory nature of this belief in capitalism’s capacity to save us from the environmentally devastating effects of capitalism gives this ethical stance a tragic beauty. While sincere and authentic, it nevertheless is an ethical stance that relies on an “exclusionary gesture of refusing to see” (Žižek, in *Violence*, 2008, p. 52), what in psychoanalysis is referred to as a fetishist disavowal of reality. We submit that this disavowal is fetishistic because the act is not simply one of repressing the real. If it was, we would rightly expect that we could all *see* the truth if we only provide more or better information to fill the subject’s lack of knowledge. The problem is that the fetishist transfers a fantasy of the real *as* the real. In the case of destructive capitalism, the fetishist disavows that particular reality by believing in another, thus subjectively negating the lack (or gap). Therefore, from the perspective of psychoanalytic theory, we submit that the gap between attitude and behaviour is best

understood not only as an ethical flaw, but also as an essential component of an ethics that makes possible the field of business sustainability.

Keywords Sustainability · Freud · Žižek · Death drive · Attitude–behaviour gap · Responsible capitalism

In the movie *Armageddon*, a group of drillers are sent to outer space to attempt to explode a giant meteor headed to earth that will make life as we know it extinct. Realising that they have failed in their mission, one of the drillers, Rockhound, exclaims: “Guess what guys, it’s time to embrace the horror. Look, we got front row tickets to the end of the earth!” Clearly Rockhound is accepting the miserable and terrifying reality of the situation as he sits on the meteor’s surface staring idly as they approach earth. At this point, enjoying the show while doing nothing, or at least nothing of real significance that could truly alter the situation, seems to be the only thing left to do. Some viewers will negatively judge Rockhound’s anticipation because it was his irrational antics that caused the mission to fail in the first place. Admittedly, his intention, or should we say his ethical attitude, was good when he volunteered for a suicide mission to save the planet. His behaviour, however, is assailable. To account for this gap between attitude and behaviour, it seems fair to ask this question: Could it be that he unconsciously sabotaged the mission so that he could enjoy the spectacle of annihilation? We submit our suspicions that the character of Rockhound and his ambivalent behaviour and destructive drive may be indicative of the field of business sustainability; the agents who strive heroically to rescue us may be the very agents who unconsciously wish to destroy us and will do so unless we stop them.

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In this paper, we thus suggest that the gap between an authentically ethical conviction of sustainability and a behaviour that avoids confronting the terrifying reality of its ethical point of reference—a gap proven by marketers to be as puzzling as persistent among “green consumers” (e.g. Jay 1990; Krystallis et al. 2012; Mainieri et al. 1997; Megicks et al. 2012; Tanner and Kast 2003)—is characteristic of the field of business sustainability. How else can we account for the increasingly obvious discrepancy between the undoubtedly good intentions of corporate leaders, business scholars, governments and consumers to prevent the environmental catastrophe and the lack of behaviour required to *actually* save life on the planet?

To be very clear, we do not accuse the field of business sustainability of ethical shortcomings on the account of this attitude–behaviour gap. If anything, we claim the opposite, namely that there resides an ethical sincerity in the convictions of business scholars to entrust capitalism [especially the “conscientious” kind (see e.g. Mackey and Sisodia 2013)] and capitalists (especially the “enlightened” kind such as Richard Branson, George Soros, the late Ray Anderson and Whole Foods CEO John Mackey) with the mammoth task of reversing the terrifying reality of ecological devastation. Yet, the very illusory nature of this belief in capitalism’s captains to save us from the environmentally devastating effects of capitalism gives this ethical stance a sublime, albeit tragic, beauty. While sincere and authentic, it nevertheless is an ethical stance that relies on an “exclusionary gesture of refusing to see” (Žižek 2008, p. 52), what in psychoanalysis is referred to as a fetishist disavowal of reality, culminating in an attitude of ‘I know very well that things are horrible with the environment because of capitalist overproduction and exploitation, but I believe none the less in [some other, qualified form of] capitalism.’ We submit that this disavowal is fetishistic because the act is not simply one of repressing the real. If it was, we would rightly expect that we could all *see* the truth if we only provide more or better information to fill the subject’s lack of knowledge. The problem is that the fetishist transfers a fantasy of the real *as* the real. In the case of destructive capitalism, the fetishist disavows that particular reality by believing in another, thus subjectively negating the lack (or gap). Therefore, from the perspective of psychoanalytic theory, we submit that the gap between attitude and behaviour is best understood not as an ethical flaw, but as an essential component of an ethics that makes possible the field of business sustainability.

However, as we propose, the persistence of the attitude–behaviour gap renders the field of business sustainability—the popular field that emerged to teach business how to become a force for ecological preservation—as a project that *comes with its own guarantee of failure*. Whilst business sustainability focuses on aggregated symbolic case

studies and micro examples of successful corporate implementation of ‘sustainability-oriented innovations’ in manufacturing, agriculture, tourism and so on,¹ macro analyses strongly suggest that these behavioural changes are nowhere near sufficient to halt the impending environmental catastrophe.² Therefore, innovations of private enterprise, where rubbish is turned into perfume, t-shirts are made out of organic cotton and industrial carpet is made out of edible material, are well-intentioned examples of what we would call *corporate lifestyle environmentalism* but they are evidently wholly inadequate to slow, let alone reverse, our collective march over the environmental cliff (Brand and Thimmel 2012; Chomsky 2011).

And while business sustainability scholars in general and marketing scholars in particular have made significant efforts to research the link between consumers’ attitudes towards the environment and their consumption behaviour (e.g. Krystallis et al. 2012; Mainieri et al. 1997; McDonagh 1998; Megicks et al. 2012; Polonsky et al. 2012), the same attention has not been paid to the field of sustainable business itself. Yet, the lack of research to understand the thought processes behind the sustainable business field has only compounded the puzzling question about why, despite an overwhelming concern towards the environment (attitude), members of the field fail to produce insights and adopt practises (behaviour) that could lead to something resembling environmental sustainability (see e.g. Devinney et al. 2010; Fleming and Jones 2012; Wessels 2006), why, that is, there should be such a vital misdirection of energy. To this end, this article, positioned as a radical intervention into current debates, draws on Freud, Glover and Žižek to put forth a psychoanalytically informed account of the

¹ See for example United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs’ reports such as this one entitled: Innovation for Sustainable Development: Local Case Studies from Africa or consult the “knowledge center” of the *Network of Business Sustainability* website, hosted by Richard Ivey School of Business, University of Western Ontario, where reports are available such as one entitled *Innovating for Sustainability*, which is brimming with case studies of companies that address each in their own way some environmental issue.

² There are truly too many too list, from the World Bank to the IMF to NASA to the Koch-Brothers funded “Berkley Earth” study and many more. Worth singling out, perhaps, is a 2011 International Energy Agency report that as Harvey (2011) points out showed 2010 as the worst year for greenhouse gas emissions yet, despite recession and despite all that well-intentioned effort by companies to reduce their carbon footprint. The agency has concluded that the 2° Celsius target for global warming, which is the upper limit of warming considered safe for the planet, will almost certainly be unachievable unless massive changes are made immediately to our economic and energy systems. In the face of such overwhelming evidence that the current economic-political system has failed utterly to contain let alone reverse CO₂ output and halt global warming, it is hard to imagine that capital’s ongoing and future sustainability efforts will do just that.

failure of the sustainability movement to bridge its own attitude–behaviour gap: i.e. *why the field consisting of civic and corporate leaders, academics, and so on keeps doing the wrong thing even though it knows better*. With recourse to Freud’s notion of the death drive, we propose that just like Rockhound in *Armageddon*, members of the business sustainability field continue to be tripped up by their own unconscious desire for sabotage and annihilation; an unconscious desire that derails reason and instead constructs a cohesive symbolic realm in which capitalism can be sustainable; a fantasy that keeps at bay the unbearable desert of the real (Žižek 2002).

Our theoretical approach builds on a quickly growing body of literature in management studies that employs fruitfully psychoanalytic theory to generate original analyses of, and insights into, the behaviour of organisations, consumers, entrepreneurs and managers (see e.g. Böhm and Batta 2010; Cluley and Dunne 2012; Desmond 2012; Jones and Spicer 2005; Woźniak 2010). It may be somewhat comforting to know that this desire to sabotage one’s own project and to desire the enjoyment of self-destruction is not unique to business sustainability. Rather this desire, which Freud theorises through the notion of death drive, is shared widely as perhaps the persistent attitude–behaviour gap among consumers who wish, but ultimately fail, to consume sustainably demonstrates. In order to illustrate our suspicion, we draw methodologically on media studies and theoretically on Žižek, Freud and Glover, as we delve into a judicious, but certainly not complete, set of popular Hollywood disaster movies to see what they tell us about ourselves; that there is a collective yearning for environmental apocalypse and an existence of a death drive that contradicts yet co-exists with our self-preservation instincts. And in the process, psychoanalytic theory might also provide a way of re-theorising the gap between consumer attitude and behaviour, not as a vexing conundrum in need to be overcome by better marketing, but as a constituting feature of the modern consumer subject without which it, as well as the form of capitalism it supports, would cease to exist.

The Real (Impossibility) of Sustainable Capitalism

Harvey (2010), in his analysis of the geography of capital, demonstrates that capital has historically expanded according to a net annual compound growth rate that averages at about 3 %. Crises erupt whenever this level of growth is impeded over a longer period of time. Therefore, important global economic actors such as the IMF, the World Bank and the United States Federal Reserve aim at designing economic policy that maintains sufficient growth to avoid large capitalist crises. The conundrum we all now

face with capitalism’s growth mandate is that if global GDP continues to grow at a crisis-preventing 3 % annual compound rate—as expected and aspired to by almost all major institutions, politicians, and businesses—then capital flowing through markets will have doubled in around 20 years from now. This doubling of capital flows creates a reasonable expectation that there will be an attendant doubling of economic activity, i.e. of production and consumption—a scenario that is anything but sustainable. With reference to this basic and well-known macroeconomic forecast, we submit that the study of business sustainability attempts to reconcile a fundamental antagonism: the oxymoron of sustainable growth.

Such bleak prognosis leads to various dismissals of attempts towards business sustainability. For example the influential material anthropologist, Miller (2012), reflects upon the various business friendly methods propagated to rescue us all, ranging from artificial markets [“the only thing being traded in carbon markets is blame” (p. 154)], sustainable communications [“greenwashing their products... to make the companies look good” (p. 156)] and promotion of green consumer values [“the planet is no more going to be saved by green consumption than by flying pigs” (p. 159)]. Miller, giving voice to a range of perspectives, states that “it would be ok if there was some reason to think these solutions could work. But they just can’t and won’t” (p. 151). Equally to the point is Cederstrom and Fleming’s (2012) attack on the related field of Corporate Social Responsibility and what they term the “Bonofication of capitalist reality” (p. 26)—that is the tendency to “believe that we can enjoy the selfish rewards of rampant profiteering and eat our cake too, basking in the euphoric afterglow that comes when one ‘cares for society’” (p. 26). In this regard what Cederstrom and Fleming call the “business discourse of ecology” is a mere “pseudo-criticality that numbs us even further, blinding us to the impending disaster of an unsustainable system” (p. 29). From such a perspective the question becomes; why is it that our commitment to sustainable capitalism, green consumerism, and business sustainability prevails despite the compelling counter-arguments and despite the massive risk at stake?

A series of explanations are imaginable. For example, it might be suggested that cynical opportunism prevails with corporations and actors cashing in on new opportunities and shielding corporate interests from the inevitable ruination that sustainability, in real terms, would deliver. Another possibility is compellingly provided by Devinney et al. (2010): sustainability discourse is propped by mythical characters like ethical consumers (their text demonstrates comprehensively a lack of empirical evidence proving the existence of an ethical consumer segment despite the recurring rhetorical mobilisation of this

segment as the harbinger of sustainability) and that while these myths contain a character that is false, they nonetheless perform a variety of societal roles by representing idealisations that open to contestation the existing, flawed behaviour and generally lacking moral order. It is here where the *naïve confusion* over the attitude–behaviour gap shows the strongest. Marketing scholars struggle to understand why consumers, once informed about how serious the situation is and how implicit they are in the environmental degradation, fail to change their destructive habits, in effect asking: Now that we have told you how bad it is and consuming this or that product will make it a little less bad, why wouldn't you do so (e.g. Cluley and Dunne 2012; Mainieri et al. 1997; Osterhus 1997)? But of course, the same question needs to be posed at the sustainability field as a whole: since we all *know* that the situation is desperate and our current approaches are woefully inadequate to incur any meaningful change, why do we continue to act *as if* what we are doing can change the course of environmental destruction (cf. Cluley and Dunne 2012)? To paraphrase Cederstrom and Fleming (2012, p. 29) this question is about what allows scholars to sustain what we know far too well is an unsustainable state of affairs.

Disavowal in Business Sustainability

A prominent contemporary thinker who offers still alternative perspectives that draw on psychoanalytic concepts is Slavoj Žižek and it is with reference to the connections between his provocative scholarships and psychoanalytic theory that this intervention constructed. Žižek argues that such is the irreversibility and extent of the annihilation of the ecology that we effectively are living in the end of times as ecological crisis inevitably pushes global capitalism towards its “apocalyptic zero point” (Žižek 2010a, b, p. x). Unable to accept mentally and comprehend such an all-encompassing and deeply traumatic reality, social consciousness embarks upon a series of delusions best understood with reference to Kubler–Ross's famous scheme for the five stages of grief that a person goes through having been diagnosed with a terminal illness—significant because we are presented with the diagnosis, via strongly worded ecological warnings, of our own imminent extinction. The sequence unfolds as follows:

The first reaction is one of ideological denial: there is no fundamental disorder; the second is exemplified by explosions of anger at the injustices of the new world order; the third involves attempts at bargaining (“if we change things here and there, life could perhaps go on as before”); when the bargaining fails,

depression and withdrawal set in; finally, after passing through this zero-point, the subject no longer perceives the situation as a threat, but as the chance of a new beginning (Žižek 2010a, b, p. xi).

Engaging with this schema, we cannot fail to see that the subject of business sustainability is engaged in the task of bargaining, as though unaware of the terminality of the situation. It is at this juncture where Žižek's psychoanalysis of ideology becomes especially instructive for a critical intervention within the subject of sustainability. In particular, his concept of grief combined with a fetishist disavowal of reality permit us to understand not only *how* a belief is constituted and sustained but also *what the specific effects are* of even unconsciously constituted and sustained beliefs (for Žižek this is the question of the role of ideology in a particular politico-intellectual project such as, in this case, business sustainability studies). Thus, we argue that on the one hand, the field of business sustainability studies constitutes a belief in the possibility of sustainable (or green) capitalism because it succeeds in convincing itself of the *impossibility* of ecological catastrophe and the end of capitalism. We argue that on the other hand, the field of business sustainability produces an ideological effect that forecloses the possibility of meaningful action taking place by precisely acting *as though* something meaningful is taking place. To put it bluntly, in its sincere aspiration to rescue the planet's ecology, *business sustainability constitutes an act of resistance to the realization of that very same objective*.

The spirit of pseudo-logic and ill-fated bargaining is fundamental to sustainability's determination that ecological crisis will create business opportunities as it generates needs for innovations that reduce environmental damage. Within this logic, a dubious assumption prevails that we can teach business to be the agent of its own containment. This very illusion reminds Žižek (2009, p. 96) of an unusual product:

There is a chocolate-flavoured laxative available on the shelves of US stores which is publicised with the paradoxical injunction: Do you have constipation? Eat more of this chocolate!—i.e. eat more of something that itself causes constipation. The structure of the chocolate laxative can be discerned throughout today's ideological landscape; it is what makes a figure like (George) Soros so objectionable. He stands for ruthless financial exploitation combined with its counter-agent, humanitarian worry about the catastrophic social consequences of the unbridled market economy. ... We should have no illusions.

For Žižek (2010a, b) the limited range of actions in developing eco-friendly market solutions that are endlessly

experimented with, as though ecological catastrophe will wait until the right solution is discovered, constitutes such illusions. This strategy amounts to a *guarantee of failure*. More worryingly Žižek argues that the inevitability is obvious and well known yet paradoxically rendered invisible and unknowable due to the human propensity to avoid hurtful truths. The consequence takes the form of ideology: he argues that there is an ‘objective spirit’ which determines what we have to know but to pretend that we do not know (see also Cluley and Dunne 2012). Žižek calls this form of non-knowledge “unknown knows”; the “disavowed beliefs and suppositions to which we are not even aware we adhere. In the case of ecology, these disavowed beliefs and suppositions are the ones that prevent people from believing in the possibility of catastrophe” (Žižek 2010b). This unusual epistemological condition of knowledge that is not knowledge relates to psychoanalytic theories of disavowal and disidentification, a process explored in Fuss’s (1995, p. 7) *Identification Papers*. According to Fuss, disavowal can be thought of as a refused identification or rather an identification that has already been made and denied in the unconscious; or as she puts it “an identification that one fears to make only because one has already made it”. In the case of business sustainability, this kind of disavowal takes on two forms. First there is the disavowal of the reality of capitalism where its admirers continue to place their desire into an object such as green capitalism or green economy (Brand and Thimmel 2012). There is a desire, in other words, for capitalism’s (lost) wholeness, which in its impossibility becomes transferred to something else, another object such as sustainable business or no-growth capitalism and so on (Smith 2011). Thus, even as growth-fuelled capitalism leads to economic and environmental exploitation it still arouses sincere enthusiasm in its believers. As already alluded to above, this is a classic case of fetishist disavowal where the identity-threatening trauma of recognising the real situation is repressed through a focus on something else. A second such instance of fetishist disavowal happens when we refuse to accept the environmental destruction caused by our own actions as ‘real existing’ producers or consumers by focusing on such partial acts as recycling, buying organic food and driving a hybrid car. The operating principle here is this: “I know, but I don’t want to know that I know, so I don’t know” (Žižek 2008, p. 53). Or as Freud (1995) puts it, disavowal is as a subject’s refusal to recognise the reality of a traumatic perception.

The Repressed of Sustainability Studies

A crucial Freudian concept for disavowed knowledge is the repressed unconscious, a concept that forms the basis of

psychoanalytic thought. Accordingly Freud (1995) conceives unconscious repression not as the act of “putting an end to, in annihilating, the idea which represents an instinct, but in preventing it from becoming conscious” (Freud 1995, p. 573). Hence Freudian theory can be understood as a relationship between knowledge that is acceptable to the conscious mind and that which is unacceptable yet lurks on in a buried state. Psychoanalysis thus presents the possibility of understanding the “bubbling up” of an unconscious that manifests itself through dreams or through irrational everyday behaviour. Fantasy and desire within the schema of conceptualising the repressed unconscious adds potency to the concept and as Freud’s (1995) *Interpretation of Dreams* demonstrates, he very much associates a spectacular dimension to the unconscious as part of the self relating to the violent and the sexual. In other words what is at stake is a theoretical framework that may help us to understand why people keep doing things that are irrational and even spectacularly self-destructive, such as remaining committed to an idea of sustainability that comes with its own guarantee of failure.

A core concept related to the unconscious is that of the id, defined by Laplanche and Pontalis (Laplanche and Pontalis 2006, p. 197) as constituting “the instinctual pole of the personality; its contents, as an expression of the instincts, are unconscious, a portion of them being hereditary and innate, a portion repressed and acquired. From the economic point of view, the id for Freud is the prime reservoir of psychical energy from the dynamic point of view, it conflicts with the ego and the super-ego which, genetically speaking are diversifications of the id”. The id is hence the “unknown and unconscious” part of the person that stands in complex relationship to the ego which is the knowable and conscious part of the person “modified by the direct influence of the external world” (Freud 1995, p. 635). Accordingly the ego can be understood as the presentable and more rational part of the self that seeks to accommodate external reality and does so by partially repressing the id, leaving both existing side-by-side without cancelling each other out and hence presents us with a theory of multiple agencies within the human psyche.

The helpful analogy that Freud deploys is that of a rider on horseback who aims to control and tame the strength of the horse in the interest of functionality but who recognises that this is a task loaded with risk; the fear that the horse might break free or overcome its master and run wild in dangerous release of unbridled desire, passion and impulse. The lesson, then, of Freud’s psychoanalysis is that human life is never just simple, “pure” life, but always full of impulses to enjoy in excess, fuelled by a repressed unconscious and dangerous drives. Freud theorises an unsettledness of psychic life and a constant possibility that rational orders can suddenly be subjected to subversion and

disruption, or perhaps more unsettling still, that any seemingly rational act is nonetheless guided and framed by instincts that stem from a repressed unconscious.

The implications that we wish to emphasise is the idea that *an unconscious life seeps in, disrupts and trips up the functional* everyday and contaminates with fantasy and desire what might otherwise be hoped to be an objective and pragmatic rational order. The point is that we cannot help ourselves, much like the rider who mistakenly thinks he is controlling the horse where in fact all he can do is keep galloping ahead. Looking at the sustainability discourse from such a psychoanalytical perspective it is difficult not to be struck by the obstinate determination of a field of knowledge and practise dedicated to prevent businesses from destroying the planet to just keep going in the face of overwhelming evidence that capital is systematically and ideologically incapable of reversing our disastrous environmental trajectory.

In order to conceive of a desire for total annihilation it is helpful to consider how Freud's theory relates to instincts for self-preservation and a preservation of the species—an instinct that Freud theorises as Eros—with what Freud described as the silent working of a death instinct or death drive: “the task of which is to lead organic life back into the inanimate state” (Freud 1995, p. 645). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (1995, p. 621) postulates one of his more famous maxims that “the aim of all life is death” and repeatedly returns to an idea of a destructiveness or a “sadism that has been driven out of the ego”, one that is manifest through ambivalent or even perverted libidinous behaviour in which the “act of obtaining mastery over an object coincides with that object's destruction” (Freud 1995, p. 621) and an ambivalence of love and hate. In *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, Freud (1995) attempts to consider the implications of a death drive with reference to wider societal structures and beyond individual psychology. In particular Freud attends aggressiveness and how this becomes channelled, through neuroses, into substitutive satisfactions and then “become sources of suffering for him by raising difficulties in his relations with his environment and the society he belongs to” (Freud 1995, p. 747), how “in consequence of this primary mutual hostility of human beings, civilised society is perpetually threatened with disintegration” (p. 750) and finally how “a portion of the instinct is diverted towards the external world and comes to light as an instinct of aggressiveness and destructiveness” (p. 754).

Hence a tension unfolds via a person's propensity towards civilisation which partially entails a mastering of nature but also a destructiveness aimed against that civilisation and against nature. This tension represents the “struggle between Eros and Death” (Freud 1995, p. 756) and this struggle, as depicted by Freud, can be thought of as

a type of Manichean account of psychic life. Accordingly we might think of the death drive as explicable of acts that are originally self-destructive in character, but as Laplanche and Pontalis (2006) remind us, eventually become directed towards the outer world in the form of aggressive or destructive instinct. It is important to note, that in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, Freud did not limit his analysis of the death drive to individual psychology but also saw the effects operating on a mass principle. In his famous open letter to Einstein ‘*In answer to the question: why war?*’, Freud notes the huge risk when the death drive shifts from an “internal tendency” and begins to operate on en masse; “a positively morbid state of things” (see Glover 1933, p. 10).

Following Freud's concerns for how the death drive produces a mass risk of war, Glover attempted to trace a repressed sadism and masochism not within the so-called war-mongers of the 1930s, but counter-intuitively, within the pacifist movement itself. Glover stated his core argument, with obvious implications for the parallel concern with sustainability, as follows:

A large part of the energy that drives a peace organisation has precisely the same source as the energy that lets loose war. In more technical language, the impulses of aggression towards external persons, if turned in on the self (i.e. short circuited) end by checking the aggression they set out to promote... Owing to the fundamental identity between some of the impulses promoting peace and the impulses giving rise to war, pacifist measures tend to be uncertain action. (p. 13)

Just as Freud did, and Žižek would do much later, Glover's analysis hinges upon an analysis of group psychology classified in terms of individual psychology, a process which Glover argued presents much more insight than typical analyses of a “herd instinct”. This perspective reveals the ambivalence between desire for war and peace which Glover argued, is psychologically endemic and most easily observable in infantile behaviour: for example when “a child has laboriously and joyfully built a house of bricks, he will frequently scatter it with one sweep of his fist” (p. 14). Glover, in other words, proceeds with the assumption that pacifists are not merely concerned with the avoidance of situations of war, but are forced to engage with a complex group of mixed impulses that co-exist at an unconscious and repressed state. In particular Glover argued that the fusion of destructive and love impulses, when directed towards external objects, becomes a form of sadism, and/or masochism when directed back towards the self. The stark problem, Glover argued, was that the pacifist movement especially attracts people struggling with such impulses and hence, “to put it crudely, so long as the

humblest civil servant is an unconscious sadist..., the country is not safe from war” (p. 41) but is prone to a “mass insanity” that pushes us towards “hopeless disintegration” (p. 46).

Similar to Glover, Segal (1987) also expressed concern that there was an unconscious yearning for global annihilation at the heart of the Cold War and that this fantasy may have motivated the accumulation of nuclear arsenal. Segal refers to recurring Cold War narratives of destruction followed by regeneration which would deliver an Armageddon and divine cleansing to pave the way for a bright, prosperous future. Indeed Cohn (1993) reminds us in his seminal *Pursuit of the Millennium*, that Christianity has always had a sense of the “last times” and “last days” and an over-arching sense of being in the final state of the world. Cohn demonstrates that many of the millenarian movements revolved around fantasies of a world reborn into innocence through a final, apocalyptic massacre. This is to say that there is a strong tradition of fantasies of apocalypse and regeneration throughout Western history. In such circumstances, it is worth noting the parallel in the current set of concerns regarding ecological annihilation with Segal’s (1987) Cold War essay:

This attitude involves the operation of denial. Close to denial, but not identical to it, is the turning of a blind eye. I think the mechanism here is of a particular form of splitting. In this split we retain intellectual knowledge of the reality, but divest it of emotional meaning. An example in public life is the fact that various opinion polls have revealed that the vast majority of people think that nuclear war is inevitable, and that probably there will be no survival. And yet the vast majority live their lives in that shadow without taking active steps to change policy. We wish to deny the consequences of our actions to others and to ourselves, and also to deny any aggressive impulses or actions on our own part.

A worrying intersection emerges with Adorno’s (1994) essay *Anti-Semitism and Fascist Propaganda* which relates the dangers of how populist discourse profits from unconscious desires, fears and fantasies of Armageddon. The death drive performs a key role in Adorno’s analysis of propaganda and allusions abound to “shedding of blood” (Adorno 1994, p. 229) and imminent catastrophe and the essay concludes with a depiction of the palpable excitement of mass audiences when promised total annihilation:

One of the West Coast demagogues once said: “I want to say that you men and women, you and I are living in the most fearful time of the history of the world. We are living also in the most gracious and most wonderful time”. This is the agitator’s dream, a

union of the horrible and the wonderful, a delirium of annihilation masked as salvation. The strongest hope for effectively countering this whole type of propaganda lies in pointing out its self-destructive implications. The unconscious psychological desire for self-annihilation faithfully reproduces the structure of a political movement which ultimately transforms its followers into victims. (Adorno 1994, p. 230)

In this above quotation, we see a direct representation of the duality of Eros and death drive, which parallels the “horrible and the wonderful” (Adorno 1994, p. 230) and how they discursively function with reference to one another. Adorno refers to an end point of such propaganda as “collective retrogression” in which responsibility and control are abandoned. Such collective madness, as Segal and Adorno might agree, returns to the final stage of Žižek’s (2010a, b, p. xi) five scale model of response in which the “subject no longer perceives the situation as a threat, but as the chance of a new beginning—or, as Mao Zedong put it: ‘There is great disorder under heaven, the situation is excellent.’”

A major theoretical consideration attends the use of individually derived psychologically concepts to categorise mass behaviour. From a political anthropological perspective, this is highly controversial. For example, Gellner (1995, p. 86) argues that in this tradition of Freudian thought the blend of Eros and the death drive are “given both a kind of physicalist interpretation and yet also a sensationalist one, as experienced drives, and are credited with an explanatory power over and above any descriptive one, where the explanation is in fact more a metaphor than a genuine specification of the manner of emergence of the thing to be explained”. Accordingly within the cited theory, ambivalence abounds. For example Žižek (2010a, b, p. 305) critiques the death drive as an act of theoretical regression as it relates a “pre-modern mythic agonism of opposed primordial forces”. Meanwhile Freud’s own unease with the concept of the death-drive is surely marked by the fact that he regularly changed the conceptualisation. From such imbroglio, Žižek argues that it would be wrong to claim that the death drive represents the desire for ecstatic self-annihilation but rather that this return to the inanimate state is not realisable and instead becomes fastened to a partial object. Therefore, the death drive becomes the desire for its lost and unattainable object—hence, we might argue that the death drive for business sustainability is the fixation of desire onto a positive partial object (CSR case studies, finding green consumers, lionising “responsible” or “enlightened” entrepreneurs, promoting conscious capitalism, etc.) which substitutes for the void of the impossible thing (an environmentally sustainable capitalism). Here, the death drive as desire means that

aspiration to completeness becomes transferred to something partial.

The above discussion presents us with multiple distinctive understandings of the death drive—arguably all equally valid given Freud’s own looseness of definition. We see the death drive understood in a literal sense of a fantasy directed towards self-annihilation, a second death drive which is an indirect route grounded in repetition as a return to inanimateness on desired terms and also the death drive as a desire for the unrealisable whole which then leads to the pursuit of the partial.

Detecting Death Drives

From a Freudian perspective, then, sustainable business’s unconscious fantasy of earthly annihilation—as expressed by continuing to supporting the destruction of the planet while acting as if the opposite is the case—presents an almost archetypical analytical case for the expression of death drive. A problem arises, of course, in making this claim empirically. Following Glover, what is ultimately needed is a psychoanalytic evaluation of the proponents of sustainability but this is a task clearly beyond the authors. Avoiding the trap of attempted armchair psychology, we seek instead a more concrete illustration of the workings of the death drive, and so borrow Žižek’s methodology, common place among media studies scholars (e.g. Carpentier and Spinoy 2008; Taylor 2010), to look at popular cultural expressions that delve deep into collective imaginations and cultural fantasies and reveal ideology at work (an already well-established technique within consumer research, for example see Holbrook and Hirschman 1993).

Following Zizek, we pay particular interest to the genre of popular blockbuster disaster movies that spectacularly depict mass annihilation. The interest in such notionally low-brow movies, as opposed to more art house friendly movies like Lars Van Trier’s *Melancholia*³ is justified for two primary reasons. First, as Žižek points out, in contrast

³ Indeed *Melancholia* was so often suggested to us as a more appropriate film for analysis by reviewers and seminar audiences that an explicit response is required. Notwithstanding the above justification for maintaining a focus on ‘banal’ blockbusters, we also remain unconvinced that *Melancholia* really does posit a more credible alternative. For example we note that Guardian critic Peter Bradshaw described the film as “entirely ridiculous, often quite boring, with a script showing worrying signs of being cobbled together” and synopsis the film as follows, “A big CGI planet is threatening to wipe out the world—if only it would hurry up and end Lars von Trier’s clunky, tiresome film” (Bradshaw 2011). Meanwhile Observer critic Philip French writes: “the movie is heavy, though without weight or gravitas — a solipsistic, narcissistic, inhuman affair” (French 2011). All things considered, we prefer the honesty of our blockbusters.

to how typical analyses of high-brow movies for high-brow scholars become practises of academic ‘gentrification’, using “simple melodrama even your senile granny would have no difficulties in following” (p. 2) allows for more complex theory to be unpacked for a wider audience in an accommodative manner. Secondly, the Lacanian tradition is primarily concerned with exploring how “reality constitutes itself in the first place” (p. 3) through language and hence it is more sensible to seek out popular and mainstream representations as opposed to the esoteric. A primary vehicle for Lacan and Žižek alike (not to mention other critical theorists such as Adorno who also analysed popular culture) is to explore how our sense of reality and our form of desire becomes constructed in a manner that bridges the constitution of the unconscious with ideology. With such a method in mind, we explore within a set of disaster movie plots the central role and ubiquity of the psychoanalytical notion of the death drive as expressed in fantasies of ecological annihilation. This turn to cinema allows us not only to illustrate the workings of the death drive as a narrative structure but also to analyse on a theoretical level how we come to act towards an object such as environmental sustainability in a way that is inconsistent with our attitude towards it.

The death drive, as Frosh (2010) illustrates, it often constitutes a ‘masterplot’ or narrative structure within cinema. This works in two primary ways: first, as a compulsion to repetition both in terms of the death drive’s desire to return to an earlier state of organic inactivity and secondly in the way those traumatic moments plague the mind. The second form concerns how narrative typically takes the form of repetition that begins with a journey away from and then back to death—a narrative understood to be intrinsic to human life. In addition, as Žižek (1992) states, in cinema the drive must also be understood as a type of closure inasmuch as “what actually happens corresponds to what one knows exactly will happen” (p. 231). In other words, we see the death-drive functioning in these movies partially in their absolute predictability—they all begin with the revelation that destruction is imminent and hence the narratives typically hinge on the excitement of the unfolding of the expected as opposed to surprising plot twists. As previously stated Freud understood the death drive as a will to return to death on the organism’s own terms and so narrative tension is produced by a process of de-tour, with the passage towards death disrupted, embellished and delayed. The point of de-tour is, therefore, to show that “there is no solution, no escape from it [the death drive]; the thing to do is not to ‘overcome’, to ‘abolish’ it, but to come to terms with it, to learn to recognise it in its terrifying dimension and then, on the basis of this fundamental recognition, to try to articulate a *modus vivendi* with it” (Žižek 1989a, b, p. 5). The below analyses presents

examples of how the death drive functions in movies and, we hope reveal a deeper morbid yearning in audiences.

Death Drive and Enjoyment in Cinema

In the 2004 disaster movie *The Day After Tomorrow*, director Roland Emmerich depicts the catastrophic effects of global warming where a sudden eruption of extreme weather events brings about—somewhat perplexingly, perhaps—rapid global cooling and the advent of a new ice age. In the movie, the paleo-climatologist Jack Hall (portrayed by Dennis Quaid) and some fellow scientists around the world observe a number of unusual and increasingly destructive natural occurrences—from rapidly melting polar ice caps to precipitously dropping ocean temperatures to dozens of tornados ravaging Los Angeles—which the scientists recognise to be signs of “runaway global warming”. Various super storms accelerate the advent of the new ice age. It then emerges that the entire northern hemisphere will be covered by miles of ice in just seven to 10 days (rather than the previously projected hundreds of years). At this moment the audience as well as the previously incredulous President and Vice President of the United States (Perry King and Kenneth Welsh) and other global warming deniers come to terms with the fact that decades of ruthless environmental exploitation and degradation by the world’s advanced economies will finally bring about the previously unimaginable—the end of the world as we know it, and in particular the end of that part of the world arguably most responsible for this turn of events in the first place; the industrialised regions of North America and Europe.

Extended shots of tornadoes laying to waste entire cities, super-storms that quick-freeze everything in their path and of a massive flood wave devouring New York City afford the audience many opportunities to fantasise about its own annihilation. For a brief moment, the camera puts the spectator on top of the tidal wave as it ploughs through the city, teasing the audience almost too brashly to swap the pretence of terror and panic for the libidinal pleasure of destruction. The president of the United States orders large-scale evacuations of the northern populations to the south, including Mexico. But for many, these efforts come much too late and millions die by force of nature. The audience is invited to truly enjoy, via extensive computer-generated imagery, the process of global destruction and obliteration.

Thus, the thesis we often encounter in disaster films, especially the ones where reckless human actions lead to environmental catastrophe, is that once the environment is brought out of balance it presents a mortal threat to humanity. Put differently, an environment in balance is to be understood as a largely passive and non-threatening

object, void of any particular drive, neither quite slave nor master. Only when this balance is perturbed—as humans too conspicuously assume the role of the master though the irresponsible exploitation of natural resources for (capitalist) over-production and consumption—do we become aware of what we could call the *ethical* attitude contained in the environment’s subjective position (for a similar argument, made from a consumer-constructivist perspective, see Canniford and Shankar 2013). What we see on the screen, then, in the depiction of tidal waves and earthquakes, is the environment with its mask off and its boundless desire to restore the balance between master and slave that may even require the elimination of mankind. One of the reasons for the popular success of environmental disaster movies, then, is not to be found in our fascination with the environment *per se* but in the pleasure of witnessing what appears when the mask falls off and the environment attains an ethical posture of self-determination.

But there is also another source of pleasure in disaster movies, which has to do with our fascination of witnessing our own annihilation, “of an enjoyment found in provoking one’s own ruin, in short, of the ‘death drive’” (Žižek 1989a, b, p. 52). An excellent expression of the “death drive”, as the acceptance without restraint of a striving for radical self-annihilation, is Rockhound’s (Steve Buscemi) famous proclamation in Michael Bay’s disaster movie *Armageddon*, “Guess what guys, it’s time to embrace the horror. Look, we got front row tickets to the end of the earth”. A few minutes later in the movie, however, the leader of the group of drillers, Harry Stampers (Bruce Willis), manages to detonate the atomic bomb through an act of self-sacrifice. Thus, within a couple of minutes, the movie presents two ethical ideal types with Rockhound representing the id of “pure” desire giving into the pleasure of ecstatic self-annihilation whilst Stampers represents the ego of stubborn salvation of civilization (channelled through the quasi-oedipal situation of Stampers removing himself so his daughter is free to marry another man). We will return to Rockhound and Stampers below as these characters prove to be useful conceptual tools for exploring theoretically the attitude-behaviour gap in sustainability studies. In the meantime, Stampers’ heroic action caused the massive asteroid to be deflected from its impact course with earth and broken up into smaller pieces thus avoiding an extinction event. However, smaller fragments nevertheless make it to earth and the audience is hence not deprived of the fantastic images of destruction as they impact on the surface. In one gratuitous scene, an asteroid fragment hits Paris which is levelled as the result of the awe-inspiring explosion. The audience experiences the rush of watching a massive cloud of dust surging and approaching while erasing everything in its way. In the

final scenes we see the ‘human family’, from India to China and the US celebrate—notwithstanding the annihilation of Paris—their survival suggesting that this near death experience may bring world peace.

In the movie *Deep Impact*, released just a few months before *Armageddon*, the cinema audience is allowed to revel in the awesome destructive power of large comet fragments hitting earth and killing millions. The largest of the comet fragments, nick-named Biederman, impacts in the Atlantic Ocean causing an enormous tidal wave about the height of the former World Trade Center. Millions along the Atlantic coasts of North and South America, Europe, and Africa perish. Here, too, the audience is provided with a front row view from the top of the wave as it approaches New York City, intensifying the anticipation of the metropolis’s total annihilation. This shot from the subject position of the destructive wave is particularly instructive because it is precisely the moment when the audience realises that we have become a plaything in the hand of forces we can no longer dominate. But more importantly, by being on top of the wave and staring at the inevitability of the ensuing destruction we are called upon to fully accept our fate without giving up our desire to “enjoy the ride”. From a Lacanian perspective, this is the moment where the audience is invited to fantasise about the possibility of becoming a subject. “For Lacan, subject is, in the final analysis, the name for this ‘empty gesture’ by means of which we freely assume what is imposed on us, the real of the death drive” (Žižek 1989a, b, p. 52), where we “confront the utter nullity of our narcissistic pretensions” with a clear ethical attitude of admission of our guilt and unequivocal willingness to die. In other words, up to the catastrophic event we lived under the illusion that we were effectively mastering and manipulating the environment according to our own will and without serious repercussions. Only when we become aware of the fact that we were wrong all along and that we are just a passive element in the interplay of libidinal forces, which we have conjured up through our own tendencies to self-annihilation, can we fully enjoy (the depiction of) our own death.

In *Deep Impact* we see the ethical attitude of the death drive most clearly depicted in the character of journalist Jenny Lerner (Téa Leoni). In order to ensure the survival of humanity, governments had built underground shelters to protect a pre-selected group of teachers, scientists, artists and engineers (no bankers, though) from the impact of the comet. Although one of the pre-selected few, Lerner gives up her spot in the final shelter-bound evacuation helicopter for her friend Beth and her little daughter. Instead, Jenny joins her estranged father (Maximilian Schell) at the family beach house. Rather than using the remaining hours before impact to commit suicide, Jenny and her father are seduced by the impending spectacle of doom and destruction. They

decide to go down to the beach to watch the comet fly over their heads towards the point of impact and then await the mega-tidal wave head-on. As it approaches we see Jenny and her father embrace as he stares at the advancing wall of water, fully accepting the fate of their impending physical destruction but also fully embracing, as it were, the requisite effacement of the entire symbolic texture of human recklessness, alienation and corruption.

In the final scenes of disaster movies we often get a similar pattern of dealing with the traumatic experience of global annihilation. In *Deep Impact*, the president of the United States addresses hundreds of thousands in front of the remnants of the capital in Washington, DC where he urges the survivors of the catastrophe to learn to “rejoice in what we have been re-given. Our planet. Our home. So now, let us begin [rebuilding]” In *The Day After Tomorrow* the president of the United States of America addresses his “fellow American survivors” from his new office in Mexico. Appearing duly humbled an enlightened president explains why the world “as we knew it” had come to an end: “For years, we operated under the belief that we could continue consuming our planet’s natural resources without consequence. We were wrong. I was wrong” Representing a standard Hollywood version of progressive liberal irony by suggesting a reversal of the hegemonic world order, the short speech also contains an acknowledgement that after the destruction of most of the so-called First World, the surviving members of formerly developed countries are now dependent on the hospitality of “nations we once called the Third World” (a hospitality that is of course extended even though Third World populations—systematically and violently prevented from entering the First World before the cataclysmic destruction of the northern world have absolutely no reason to do so). The message, however, is clear: now, that the rich and arrogant North has been humbled it will have to cease its racist and xenophobic posture towards the South and finally embrace (i.e. “try to understand” and “get along with”) the whole of the human family. Thus, despite the horror and death it inflicted, the near extinction event has given the survivors a chance to create a different world. A similar sense of having been given something new through the catastrophe, something perhaps even better than what was there before is hinted at in the final scene of *The Day After Tomorrow* where we see Dr. Hall flying in a rescue helicopter over New York City. As Hall surveys the frozen city underneath with a combination of horror and admiration he exclaims, “Look at that. Have you ever seen the air so clear”

In these moments, disaster movies move on from an acknowledgement of our masochistic desires for self-annihilation to an indistinct fantasy of a new utopia. We, in the audience, are encouraged to repress the traumatic experience of the catastrophic event and relegate it to what

Žižek (1989a, b, p. 50) calls the Lacanian real: “a point which never took place ‘in (symbolic) reality’, which was never inscribed into the symbolic texture, but which must nonetheless be presupposed as a kind of ‘missing link’ guaranteeing the consistency of our [to be newly created] symbolic reality”. Thus, in *The Day After Tomorrow* this “move” allows for the opening up of a space of compassion for both the perturbed environment’s ethical attitude of destructive self-determination and the survivors’ (collectively the villain in the movie) newly found sense of guilt and responsibility. Such a moralist turn may not be surprising but it certainly is a bit unfair because with these ending scenes the same audience that was just treated to enjoying the masochistic fantasy of its own annihilation is now asked to move directly from an acknowledgement of man’s sadistic exploitation of the environment to a sense of guilt and compassion for man: ‘this is the consequence of recklessly exploiting the environment. This is the price we have to pay for our sadistic desire of environmental degradation.’ But just because there is no room in Hollywood’s moral universe for the acknowledgement of the pleasure we derive from provoking our own ruin does not mean it no longer is responsible for a gap between how we behave and what we rationally believe.

Discussion: (Re-)Theorising the Attitude–Behaviour Gap

The above movies all appear to pander to a mass appetite for enjoying the awesome spectacle of the violent destruction of our civilisations. In this regard they serve as examples of the death drive in its most simple articulation—a fantasy of self-destruction, radical negativity directed against nature and then back against humanity itself. However, the additional and more complex idea of a death drive as the curved space of its formal structure that submits Eros to repetition is also addressed via the morning after scenarios, where, having been suitably humbled by the falsity and hubris of seeking to master nature while instead being annihilated by it, a now enlightened humanity is thus left to rebuild itself accordingly and then to eventually die with a more appropriate and respectful relationship with nature. Any analysis of the attitude–behaviour gap should, therefore, take into consideration that contradictory emotions are at play and that any notional green consumer harbours the antagonistic desire to see our planet destroyed.

To explore this point further, let us return for a moment to *Rockhound* and *Stampers* in *Armageddon*. *Rockhound*, one could say, represents the typical green consumer who is trying to do the right thing but in the end fails to do so. Plagued by an indistinct sense of guilt and failure, this

enlightened consumer decides to give into the inevitable outcome of his desire to consume too much of the wrong (i.e. unsustainable) stuff: ecological destruction and ultimately the annihilation of the human race. It is, therefore, *Rockhound* who symbolises the death drive in a much purer form than *Stampers* does, even though *Stampers* does in fact die in the movie. That is so because *Rockhound* ends up desiring the partial thing (enjoyment of the spectacle) because the whole (salvation of earth) is unattainable. The endless pursuit of this lack between the partial and the whole allows him to maintain the gap between his intentions and his destructive behaviour, while *Stampers* labours for the attainment of full gratification, a space without lack where nothing is left to be desired (signified by the total salvation of earth, except of course for Paris which, the film seems to imply, doesn’t matter). The gap between *Rockhound* and *Stampers* is the struggle between the id and the ego, pure passion and repression (cf. Marcuse 1969). What is significant here, however, is that *Stampers*’ effort to behave in accordance with his attitude is precisely what gets him killed. *Could there be a clearer indication of what awaits the ethical and “green” consumer subject that manages to act in accordance with her beliefs? In capitalism such a subject ceases to exist.* It has no role to play because this subject successfully represses an unconscious desire for what it lacks. But capitalism without a subject desiring what alludes it, without aspiring to the partial object that always promises gratification but never fulfils, ceases to be capitalism. *Capitalism depends on the subject’s drive toward self-annihilation*, in Freud signified by the womb where nothing lacks and all desires were instantly gratified, *as well as his/her failure to ever truly reach this point.* The death drive, for Freud, is thus the very opposite of dying—it is rather the name for the will of self-annihilation that is not realisable and that gets stuck “in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain” (Žižek 2006b, p. 62). Capitalism, then, requires the gap between attitude and behaviour that constitutes the lost object, or more precisely, capitalism requires a subject that makes *loss itself* its object, which is something *Stampers* cannot do. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, marketing scholars that are motivated to find solutions to the puzzling question about why consumers fail to purchase environmentally friendly or green products (behaviour) despite an overwhelming concern towards the environment (attitude) (Gupta and Ogden 2006, p. 199), are the true anti-capitalist utopians of our time, albeit probably unconsciously so. Or to put it bluntly, to believe that the attitude–behaviour gap can be eliminated without also eliminating capitalism is like believing in magic.

In addition to this conceptual conundrum for sustainable capitalism—of requiring an impossible consumer subject,

there is another concern with the idea of sustainability studies as a subject that short circuits due to its own inability to confront the reality of ecological disaster. In this regard, a core contribution of Žižek's approach is his focus on unacknowledged gaps between the symbolic and the real. Žižek does so by use of the Lacanian triad which identifies three modalities: the real, the imaginary and the symbolic. As he states—capital is the only *real* of our lives while the threat of ecological destruction remains at a *symbolic* level in which we are ill-equipped to conceive or at least take seriously. As Jameson (2003, p. 73) famously states, “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism”. Žižek provides a powerful example:

All one has to do here is to compare the reaction to the financial meltdown of September 2008 with the Copenhagen conference of 2009: save the planet from global warming (alternatively: save the AIDS patients, save those dying for lack of funds for expensive treatments and operations, save the starving children, and so on)—all this can wait a little bit, but the call “Save the banks!” is an unconditional imperative which demands and receives immediate action. The panic was here absolute, a trans-national, non-partisan unity was immediately established, all grudges between world leaders momentarily forgotten in order to avert *the catastrophe*. We may worry as much as we want about global realities, but it is Capital which is the Real of our lives” (Žižek 2010a, b, p. 338).

This leads us to say that, in parallel to the previously mentioned mythical green consumer as evidenced by Devinney et al. (2010) we could argue that sustainability is peopled by such mythical figures as the social entrepreneur, the ethical investor and the green factory, whose case studies become aggregated in the business school and by think-tanks—we term this the *dabbling in the symbolic* as opposed to *confronting the real of capital accumulation*. This is to say that Žižek presents us with a way of thinking about how discourse conveys the way that the subject relates to this content. As he puts it (Žižek 2006a, p. 16): “A man who lives in a large city and owns a Land-Rover (for which he obviously has no use) doesn't simply lead a no-nonsense, down-to-earth life rather, he owns such a car in order to signal that he leads his life under the sign of a no-nonsense, down-to-earth attitude”. In this same manner, we argue that the rise of corporate sustainability is there to convey an acceptable way that business relates to ecological catastrophe and does so precisely within the symbolic, as opposed to real, realm. Or put differently, within the symbolic fabric of our lives, such an attitude allows us to pretend to be doing something that *really* matters even

though we know that it doesn't. If there ever was an ideological choice, this is it: the *corporate lifestyle environmentalist* invocations to “buy the hybrid car”, “recycle”, “use organic cotton”, “make perfume out of waste” covers up a number of disturbing contradictions and tensions, first and foremost of them all, the idea of a sustainable capitalism (Brand and Thimmel 2012). On this, “we should have no illusions” (Žižek 2008, p. 96).

Thus, drawing on Freud, Glover and Žižek, we have tackled the vexing question of why an entire field of study, constituted to save us all from environmental catastrophe, behaves in a way that permits its participants to act *as if* they are doing something of significance in the face of clear evidence to the contrary (c.f. Cluley and Dunne 2012). Or to put the question in psychoanalytic terms: why the field continues to *dabble in the space of the symbolic*, while ignoring the glaring ruptures brought about by the realm of the *real*? The consequences for the field of sustainability studies are stark. The onus of analysis shifts from exploring external consumers and producers, to instead turning the gaze inwards and to probe for unconscious destructive impulses. As Glover stated in the build-up to WW2, “in so far as unconscious masochism is liable to sap internal defences, it may be regarded as the real traitor in the camp” (p. 72). In other words, from a psychological perspective, the will to save the planet stems from the same part of the psyche in which our destructive instincts are to be found and we simply cannot trust ourselves. Eighty years later, Glover's (1933, p. 46) suggestion still holds:

And if he (a medical psychologist) was compelled to crystallise in one formulation, the experience of applied individual psychology, to suggest in a phrase what panacea psychology has to offer a war-ridden species, it would probably take the form a new sixth commandment: *Know thine own (unconscious) sadism*.

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