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'Founder as Victim, Founder as God': Peter Thiel, Elon Musk and the two bodies of the entrepreneur

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ABSTRACT

Silicon Valley's tech moguls have increasing political ambitions, as spectacularly illustrated by Peter Thiel's and Elon Musk's involvements in the US 2022 midterm elections and 2024 presidential election. Considering these businessmen's ability to turn their fortune into political influence, it is important to grasp how they understand their political role. This article does so, first, by focusing on Musk and Thiel's theory of the 'founder,' who they imagine as the enlightened future leader of a redeemed social order, and who they pretend to incarnate. The second part of the article analyses how these narratives about the triumphant founder are pervaded by latent paranoia and anxiety: the godly founder is fantasized as an object of intense hatred, perpetually threatened. Drawing on Freud and Lacan's psychoanalytical concepts, I demonstrate that the two facets of the founder, as god and victim, are intrinsically connected. Considering them together helps to highlight the fragilities of the founder model and denaturalize the central place it has been given in neoliberal cultures.

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Introduction

Recent works on 'postneoliberalism' (Davies and Gane 2021) have attempted to understand the role Silicon Valley and its techno-utopian imaginary have played in the emergence of hybrid forms of neoliberalism. Specific attention has been given to the ways the most libertarian branches of the 'neoliberal thought collective' (which brings together neoliberal scholars, politicians, journalists, corporate leaders and knowledge professionals [Mirowski and Plehwe 2009]) have been in conversation with famous Silicon Valley tech gurus – such as Peter Thiel, Curtis Yarvin, Patri Friedman or Balaji Srinivasan. Together, they have promoted the formation of neoreactionary movements that advocate for the exit from democracy and for the rebuilding of the state on the model of the start-up (Smith and Burrows 2021; Slobodian 2023a). Elon Musk's plans for establishing a 'self-governing' colony on Mars (Starlink 2022)¹ has, for instance, been celebrated by the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE) as opening up 'enormous potential' for the emergence of private settlements, blossoming outside the reach of 'restrictive' earthly governments (Walker-Werth 2022).

The prominent place given to the entrepreneur in (post)neoliberal fantasies about future polities are in adequation with Silicon Valley tycoons' political ambitions. In recent decades, Silicon Valley's tech barons have multiplied incursions in the political realm. No longer satisfied with their business

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and media fame, they covet becoming power brokers on the global stage. Peter Thiel, for instance, has sought to shape the political landscape on the US (far) right. After becoming Silicon Valley's first major figure to publicly declare his support for Donald Trump in 2016, he is today a central financial backer of the US New Right's neo-reactionary fringes (Chafkin 2021). Among others, he bankrolled the 2022 senatorial campaigns of two of his faithful collaborators and 'Make America Great Again' supporters, Blake Masters and JD Vance (Pogue 2022) – paving the latter's way to the US vice-presidency. Since 2022, Thiel's fostering of the far right has found a powerful support in Elon Musk. After 'free[ing]' Twitter (Musk 2022c) to 'help humanity, whom [he] love[s]' by offering it 'a common digital town square' (Musk 2022b), Musk has embraced the cause of neoreactionism under the pretense of protecting free speech. He has leveraged the many companies he owns to influence US and world politics – for instance by using Starlink to meddle in the Russia-Ukraine war,² as well as Twitter (renamed 'X' in 2023) to promote far-right and libertarian candidates in Argentina, El Salvador, Germany, the UK, and most spectacularly the US with his endorsement of Donald Trump as presidential candidate in 2024 (Slobodian 2025). Musk played an active role in Trump's victorious presidential campaign, speaking at rallies and donating \$277 million to support Trump and Republican candidates (Ingram and Reilly 2024). His efforts have been rewarded by his nomination at the head of a custom-made 'Department of Government Efficiency' (or 'DOGE,' named after a cryptocurrency Musk supports) – a government advisory committee that will assist the second Trump administration in its aim to cut \$500 billion from the US federal budget (Chidi 2024).

Silicon Valley barons' exceptional organizational and financial power, as well as their willingness to convert it into political influence, has led researchers to debate whether we have entered the age of 'technofeudalism': a post-capitalist era dominated by Big Tech billionaires who exploit their respective digital platforms (which they control as 'personal fiefdoms') and the streams of personal data they manage to manipulate their users' behavior, keep them captive, and extract rent from them (Dean 2020; Durand 2020; Morozov 2022; Varoufakis 2023). Leaving aside the question of whether technofeudalism represents a new stage of capitalism, one can only be concerned by Silicon Valley tycoons' growing ability to influence users' decision-making (and accessorially their voting) in the age of 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff 2019), as well illustrated by the Cambridge Analytica scandal. As such, it becomes important to understand how these tech billionaires understand their political role. This article offers to do so by studying the self-narratives of two of them, Peter Thiel and Elon Musk. I am specifically interested in the ways Musk and Thiel's vision of themselves as potential ruler is articulated, via the figure of the 'founder,' to the way they conceive their social role as entrepreneurs, and in how both are used to justify their domination over the future order Musk and Thiel wish to create. Musk and Thiel's self-narratives are representative of a larger trend among Silicon Valley's elite and the themes I will uncover throughout the article can also be found in the self-narratives of other tech figures who recently expressed their support for the Trump administration (Schleifer and Yaffe-Bellamy 2024), such as Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and Amazon's Jeff Bezos (see Little and Winch 2021), OpenAI's CEO Sam Altman (see Friend 2016), or venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz's co-founder Marc Andreessen (2023).

Part of the political influence businessmen like Musk and Thiel have accrued comes from the aura that has been bestowed on them as 'founders'; that is, in Silicon Valley's newspeak, those who founded a successful start-up – a label that, as *Forbes* reverently describes, 'carries connotations of creativity and innovation, determination, native intelligence, and a sense of fearlessness' (Fairbrothers and Gorla 2013). The evocative strength of the 'Californian ideology' (Barbrook and Cameron 1996) and its 'founders' reaches well beyond the 'Valley.' Cédric Durand (2020, 51–52), for instance, discusses how the 'Silicon Valley consensus,' with its (resoundingly neoliberal) call to unleash entrepreneurial forces and turn states into 'start-up nations,' has replaced (the no-less neoliberal) 'Washington consensus' in global governance. Similarly, the Foucauldian scholarship has highlighted how neoliberal contemporary societies operate on a quasi-universalization of the entrepreneurial ethos, understood as the maximization of one's human capital (Foucault

2004, 232; Brown 2015, 102). In neoliberal cultures, the entrepreneur becomes a model around which to remake both society and the self (Dardot and Laval 2010, 403–56). As the arch entrepreneurs, the Silicon Valley founders have been given outstanding visibility – as illustrated by the often-complacent news coverage of their deeds or the misplaced excitement of star-struck world leaders striving to be seen alongside them (Untersinger 2023).

I have chosen to focus on Musk and Thiel because they occupy a special place in the Silicon Valley imaginary. Both belong to what *Fortune Magazine* has branded the ‘PayPal mafia’: the team that founded PayPal and since invested in some of the most successful Silicon Valley start-ups, including LinkedIn (Reid Hoffman) and YouTube (Jawed Karim) (O’Brien 2007). As the epitome of successful entrepreneurship, the mafia has become a quasi-institutionalized ‘ruling class’ within the Silicon Valley bubble (Vance 2016, 93). After selling PayPal, Musk went on to found SpaceX and was an early investor of Tesla and co-founder of Neuralink (acting today as their CEO), while Thiel created the Founders Fund – a prominent venture capital firm that invests in high-tech companies, with a particular focus on artificial intelligence (DeepMind), aerospace (SpaceX), consumer internet (Facebook, Airbnb, Spotify), surveillance software (Anduril, Palantir), and biotechnologies (Unity, Stemcentrx) (Founders Fund 2021). Both were also early investors of OpenAI, the firm that launched ChatGPT. Additionally, as mentioned above, both men have become the symbol of the new rapprochement between Silicon Valley and the neoliberal thought collective. After publishing his essay ‘The Education of a Libertarian’ (2009) with the Cato Institute and another (2008) with the Hoover Institution, Thiel was awarded the 2015 Hayek Lifetime Achievement Award by the Austrian Economic Center (AEC 2015) and participated in at least two general meetings (in 2018 and 2020) of the Mont Pèlerin Society (Thiel and Robinson 2020).³ Similarly, Musk has recently started to share his newfound love for Milton Friedman – a central figure of the neoliberal movement – with his X followers, multiplying references to him (see for instance Musk 2024c).

Musk and Thiel also speak and write a lot – thus providing a fair amount of primary material to analyze. Like many of their founder friends, they have been involved in narrating the epic of their success in a plethora of and lucrative industry of management books, addresses, and interviews – of which Thiel’s 2014 *New York Times* best-seller *Zero to One* is a good representative.⁴ Cloaked in the aura of those who spectacularly ‘made it,’ the entrepreneurial superstars here stage themselves as rolemodels to better capitalize on this function and attract investors for their prospective ventures. They provide advice to generations of aspiring entrepreneurs eager to get their share of the Silicon Valley dream, in which creative freedom meets the promise of phenomenal riches.⁵ Crucially, as we shall see throughout the article, these discursive productions are designed to spread the entrepreneurial ethos, while also proving the tech tycoons’ exceptionality as innovators to justify their domination and privileges – an ambivalence one finds in neoliberal theory too as it both presents the entrepreneurial spirit as a universal trait (von Mises 1998; Kirzner 1973; Plehwe 2020) while also singling out entrepreneurial innovators as ‘scouts’ leading the ‘less energetic’ on the path to progress (Hayek 2011, 98).⁶

The article has therefore two interconnected aims. First, it aims to understand how Silicon Valley founders, and specifically Musk and Thiel, are involved in discursive processes designed to construct the heroicized persona of the start-up founder. And second, how they make the founder the perfect model of the ruler in a post-democratic age (the word ‘founder’ also draws on the mystique associated with the United States’ ‘founding fathers’ [Slobodian 2023a, 213]). In both cases, I am specifically interested in the performative dimension of Musk and Thiel’s founder – what I also call their operations of self-curation or self-composure – as they both describe the founder as idealized versions of themselves while also attempting to give life to it by impersonating it.

Academic literature has recently given a lot of scrutiny to the political status and power of Musk and Thiel, focusing on, for instance, their patriarchal power (Little and Winch 2021), their exploitative work ethic (Crandall, Brown, and McMahon 2021), but also the colonial underpinnings of their ideology (Utrata 2024; Little and Winch 2021). While drawing on these important works as well as on recent works on Silicon Valley’s eschatological narratives (Geiger 2020; Palmås, Ekberg,

and Åberg 2022), this article takes a slightly different route by adopting a psychoanalytical reading of Musk and Thiel's narratives in the second part of the article. Such an approach is justified by my focus on Musk and Thiel's operations of self-composure (that is, their attempts to craft and maintain their public persona), which involve self-identification processes that are deeply suffused by libidinal affects – something psychoanalytical theory is particularly good at shedding light upon (Dawson 1994). Lacanian psychoanalytical models have for instance been used by Jones and Spicer (2005) to understand the 'hailing' properties of the enterprise discourse. This article builds on a well-established tradition of using psychoanalysis for ideology critique, and specifically for determining how subjects become libidinally invested in problematic practices (see for instance Žižek 1989; Stavrakakis 2007; Glynos 2012; Wilson 2014; Watt 2021; Swyngedouw 2022; Maher 2023). Psychoanalytical theory is a particularly useful tool to analyze the ways Thiel and Musk's founder narratives function as mobilizing fictions: they contribute to create and shape imaginary models (here the 'founder') that secure their audience's but also Thiel and Musk's own recruitment and affective investment into the visions of the post-democratic future they promote. In addition, psychoanalytical theory enables one to disrupt the impression of fulfillment and completion that these imaginary models are meant to display. It helps to highlight their internal limits and shortcomings, and to be attentive to moments of dissonance in what are otherwise carefully curated and controlled narratives, thus showing that Musk and Thiel's attempts to incarnate the founder do not quite work. The imaginary persona they promote as key to success is fundamentally impossible to emulate and sustain both for their audience, but also for themselves.

My psychoanalytical approach consists in developing a 'suspicious hearing' (Brook 1987, 12) by paying attention to Musk and Thiel's mode of expression: the analogies and images they use, as well as their distortion and the gaps this reveals. I am specifically interested in foregrounding the distinctively psychoanalytical motifs surfacing from their narratives – motifs that I analyze with reference to Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalytical concepts and theories. As the rest of the article illustrates, Thiel and Musk's imaginations, far from being very original, find their substance in a mix of sci-fi and fantasy literature (e.g. *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* [Little and Winch 2021]), Christian eschatology and classical myths. The two latter having been widely used by Freud and Lacan to formulate some of their most lasting concepts, psychoanalytical theory is thus, again, useful to interpret Musk and Thiel's discourse. I draw on a range of primary sources by the two businessmen, which include an autobiographical self-management book (Thiel and Masters 2014), essays (by Thiel), university lectures (Thiel's 2012 classes at Stanford) and addresses (e.g. Musk's 2012 commencement speech at the California Institute of Technology; Thiel's 2023 speech at the Oxford Union), conference talks (e.g. Thiel at the MPS in 2020), newspaper interviews, and social media posts (exclusively by Musk as Thiel keeps away from them). I also use their firms' materials, including their websites, publicly available business presentations, and manifestos. These are part of Musk and Thiel's self-promotional discourse, with inflections specific to each. For instance, Musk's mode of intervention privileges theatrical performance and orchestrated playfulness (e.g. Iron Man, the Tesla Roaster in space), while Thiel, a former philosophy student at Stanford who likes punctuating his interventions with references to philosophers like Nietzsche (Thiel 2023b) and to the Bible (Thiel 2008; 2015; 2023a), is involved in a more explicit effort to theorize the founder's function.⁷ I supplement these materials with a range of secondary sources on Musk, Thiel, and their companies – commentaries by tech bloggers, observations made by journalists about their demeanor during interviews, as well as by Musk's 2016 *authorized* biographer, Ashley Vance (authorization involving a level of control by Musk over the story being written about him). These materials cover almost 20 years, but Musk and Thiel keep repeating the same things, often resorting to the same mantras over the years (e.g. Thiel's speech about non-acceleration, or Musk's ambition to make humanity multiplanetary). While it is difficult to assess whether the two businessmen believe in what they sell, one can only note their striking consistency in this regard. In any case, the contributions analyzed in this article are carefully curated materials:

they represent what Thiel and Musk *give us to see*. Yet, as I will discuss in the second part of the article, *something* often exceeds them.

The article proceeds in two stages, mirroring the programmatic title that Thiel gave to one of his classes at Stanford, ‘Founder as Victim, Founder as God’ (Thiel and Masters 2012a). The first part examines how Thiel and Musk construct the founder as the ideal – and quasi-messianic – ruler of a future post-democratic order, as well as their strategies to resemble this figure. The second part goes back to some of these narratives about the triumphant founder to see how they are pervaded by latent paranoia and anxiety: the godly founder is fantasized as an object of intense hatred, perpetually threatened. As suggested by the juxtaposition in Thiel’s title, the founder’s statuses as ‘god’ and ‘victim’ are intrinsically interconnected. Considering them together helps to highlight the fragilities of the founder model, i.e. to see it as a figure of excess impossible to emulate (even for its proponents) but whose excess and unattainability are also at the core of its power of attraction.

‘Founder as God’: the making of the entrepreneur-king

Musk and Thiel like emphasizing the heroic character of the founder to prove their own superiority to their public. The first part of the article demonstrates that this self-promotion is part of a discursive strategy that aims to ground the founder’s legitimacy to rule in a post-democratic age by presenting the founder as an all-powerful and godly figure.

Magicians of the twenty-first century

Musk and Thiel present the act of ‘founding’ start-ups as something heroic and exceptional. Thiel claims in *Zero to One* that ‘doing new things’ is ‘harder to imagine,’ as it ‘requires doing something nobody else has ever done’ (Thiel and Masters 2014, 6–7). According to him, ‘[t]he act of creation is singular, as is the moment of creation, and the result is something fresh and strange’ (2014, 1). What is suggested is that there is something otherworldly and slightly uncanny in the founder’s capacity to bring the new about. For Thiel, new technologies are generally akin to ‘miracles’ (2014, 2). Musk expresses similar ideas when he claims that new technologies are like ‘magic’ – a ‘magic’ that 300 years ago could have caused its creator to be ‘burned at the stake’ (Musk 2012, 1). The founder is presented here as a thaumaturgist, who, by their creation, can ‘rewrite the plan of the world’ (Thiel and Masters 2014, 2).

For Thiel, the founders are animated by a ‘sense of a mission’ (Thiel and Masters 2014, 10): they are responsible for uncovering the ‘secrets’ that the world still has ‘left to give up’ (2014, 94). Musk presents his approach in similar terms, as a reflection on the ‘*problems* that are likely to most affect the future of humanity’ (Musk 2012, 2; my emphasis). SpaceX’s CEO conceives these problems as related to the production of sustainable energy and to ‘making life multi-planetary’ in the face of potential ecological catastrophe (2012, 2; 2016), whereas Thiel wishes to ‘cure cancer, dementia, and all the diseases of age and metabolic decay’ (Thiel and Masters 2014, 102), and develop seasteading, cyberspace, and outer space (Thiel 2009; Founders Fund 2020). As such, they understand their activities as ‘vitally important’ (Musk 2012, 2) for the long-term survival of the human species, with both insisting they offer their public a new and necessary ‘hope’ (Thiel in Vance 2016, 336). They do so by turning metaphysical questions like the mysteries of death or space into technological problems (O’Connell 2017, 180), which are thereby placed within the grasp of human agency. They ‘re-enchant’ the world through technique (Crandall, Brown, and McMahon 2021), stimulating collective desires and fantasies by opening ‘new spaces for freedom’ (Thiel 2009), such as Musk’s grandiose plans for colonizing Mars (Musk 2022a).

Critics have examined how these tech narratives about the future, with their clear religious (Beckert 2016) and eschatological dimensions (Geiger 2020; Palmås, Ekberg, and Åberg 2022), are integrated in the functioning of contemporary capitalism.⁸ They are ideologically mobilized to justify capital accumulation and wealth disparities, like for instance when Musk uses his ambition

to make ‘life multiplanetary & extend the light of consciousness to the stars’ (which requires substantial financial resources) to legitimize his colossal wealth (Musk 2021; Palmås, Ekberg, and Åberg 2022).⁹ These messianic narratives are similarly used to support an exploitative work ethic: they are designed to ‘sustain an investment in work enough to justify, for instance, Musk’s eighty-five to one-hundred-hour workweek’ (Crandall, Brown, and McMahon 2021, 852), as well as his arbitrary demands that his workers do the same (Corfield 2022). Lastly, Musk and Thiel’s eschatological narratives are meant to reveal the existence of areas that are still out of the reach of capitalist exchanges – such as the ‘new frontiers’ in space, in cyberspace, and at sea that Thiel designates in his Cato essay (Thiel 2009; Thiel and Masters 2014, 97–102) – and that can now be opened (thanks to them) to capitalist investments, thus playing on the dynamic of the ‘spatial fix’ analyzed by David Harvey (Harvey 1981; Dickens and Ormrod 2007; Palmås, Ekberg, and Åberg 2022). Conceptualized as *terra nullius* (empty territories or in Thiel’s words the ‘unknown’ [Thiel and Masters 2014, 104]), these spaces can be territorialized, turned into new markets and have their resources extracted and exploited – replicating the logic of colonial dispossession (Utrata 2024; Little and Winch 2021, 144–166).¹⁰

Yet, what I want to stress here is how these narratives also pave the way for legitimizing the social domination of the founder by establishing their outstanding merit. Musk and Thiel play with the messianic character they attribute to their work to dramatize their total devotion to their cause. Musk’s biographer writes for instance that Musk has been ‘consum[ed] for decades’ by the ‘problems’ he is trying to solve (Vance 2016, 344; Musk 2012, 2). On the other hand, Thiel emphasizes the difficulty of ‘dedicating [one’s] life to something no one else believes in’ (Thiel and Masters 2014, 98) and argues that ‘secrets’ will ‘yield only to relentless searchers’ (2014, 102). Searching is thus a matter of quasi-religious and obsessional devotion (2014, 122–123). Only those who have the mental strength to persist in pursuing their dream – no matter how ‘hard’ and isolating it is – will achieve something. Musk follows a similar pattern when stressing that his innovative ideas might have appeared ‘crazy’ to some (Musk 2012, 2; Vance 2016, 4). As Musk emphatically proclaims, ‘[i]magination is the limit’ (Musk 2012, 4): no material frontiers can resist the enterprise of those who have faith in their power to make their dreams come true. This steadfastness is allegedly what makes Musk and his peers founders. It also grounds their legitimacy to rule.

The entrepreneur-king

One of the founder’s responsibilities, according to Thiel, is to attract employees (and, more generally, the public) by demonstrating the ‘compelling’ dimension of their ‘mission’ (Thiel and Masters 2014, 121). Interestingly, Thiel compares the structure of start-ups to that of a monarchy. According to him, the ‘best arrangement [for a start-up] is a quasi-mythological structure where you have a king-like founder who can do more than in a democratic ruler [*sic*]’ – an inspirational individual vested by people ‘with all sorts of power and ability’ (Thiel and Masters 2012a). This charismatic leader is characterized by the strength of their determination and decision-making, in a typical Schumpeterian fashion (Schumpeter 1951, 1954). They direct the collective effort necessary to achieve the futuristic projects they have in mind. As capitalist economies become ‘a struggle over imaginaries of future technologies’ (Beckert 2016, 170), the founder is able to impose their vision of the future, thereby closing off other possibilities (Geiger 2020).

Like the Schumpeterian entrepreneur, the founder is thus animated by a warlike ethos. They lead the start-up troops for the conquest of new markets. Ruthless competitiveness is recognized as core to the ‘PayPal mafia’ (O’Brien 2007; Vance 2016, 85), as well-illustrated by the ‘world domination index’ created at Confinity/PayPal to count new users (Chafkin 2021, 59). Thiel specifically remembers the warfare that opposed Thiel’s Confinity (whose payment service was already called PayPal) to Musk’s X.com, prior to their merging as ‘PayPal by X.com.’ In this hyper-testosteroned struggle for leadership, each start-up obsessively fantasized about ‘beat[ing]’ and ‘defeat[ing]’ the other, which allegedly led a Confinity engineer to design an actual ‘bomb for this purpose’ (Thiel and

Masters 2014, 42).¹¹ Musk's well-documented intimidation practices and anti-union tactics (Sainato 2018) are also representative of this intrinsic violence. Workers questioned by his biographer explicitly connected his visionary drive with an exploitative and autocratic management of the workforce. One anonymous former employee specifically compares the workers to 'ammunition: used for a specific purpose until exhausted and discarded' and suspects that this behavior might be 'calculated to keep the rest of the workforce on their toes and scared' (quoted in Vance 2016, 340).¹²

The emphasis on aggressive instincts is often articulated in Thiel's narratives with the motif of the founder's impatience with the institutional status quo (Thiel and Masters 2012a), which today he calls the 'ancien regime' in an explicit reference to 'the aristocracy of pre-revolutionary France' (Thiel 2025). Crucially, Thiel has become the spokesperson of neoliberal libertarian fringes, as illustrated by his *Cato Unbound* essay 'The Education of a Libertarian' (2009). He is a vocal supporter and funder of charismatic Silicon Valley libertarian figures, like Patri Friedman (grandson of Milton Friedman) and Curtis Yarvin (Chafkin 2021).¹³ All three are key 'theorists of exit,' advocating the constitution of settlements beyond the jurisdiction of the terrestrial states (Slobodian 2023a; Smith and Burrows 2021). In Thiel's unapologetic brand of libertarianism, politics is conceived of as either static or as an environment of endless degenerative and bureaucratic reproduction, opposed to the creative world of entrepreneurship (Thiel 2009). The state is particularly blamed for reinforcing mimetic behavior by encouraging the risk-averse reproduction of things that already exist. Through their creations, the founder must therefore break people's passive complacency and 'escape from politics in all its forms' by creating 'a new world' (Thiel 2009). To make this point, Thiel takes Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber,¹⁴ as an example, and states that the bombs that Kaczynski mailed were meant 'to destroy existing institutions (...) and let people start over and work on hard problems anew' (Thiel and Masters 2014, 95).

For Thiel, Musk and their peers, the founder comes to represent a positive alternative to the way politics is traditionally done. For Google's Larry Page, Musk is 'a figure that should be replicated during a time in which the businessmen and politicians have fixated on short-term, inconsequential goals' (Vance 2016, 355). Similarly, reproducing the rhetoric of the neoliberal Chicago School's critique of anti-trust and its defense of efficient monopolies (Davies 2014, 88–95), Thiel believes that corporate 'creative monopolies,' like Microsoft's on its operating system, are more efficient at making innovations than governmental action (Thiel and Masters 2014, 32); they are the drivers of 'progress' (2014, 33). Thiel's opinion on the matter takes a more disturbing turn in a 2007 essay titled 'The Straussian Moment,' in which he claims that Western civilization is threatened in its very existence by Islamist terrorism. As he states, traditional politics, with its 'interminable and inconclusive parliamentary debates' (Thiel 2007, 208), cannot do much against it. Drawing on Leo Strauss' work, Thiel advocates adopting non-constitutional strategies of deception and counterinsurgency, by relying on intelligence and secret services (2007, 208). Characteristically, such vision leaves ample space for intervention for (non-elected) 'ambitious people' (2007, 207), who can discreetly offer their services to governmental agencies, and thereby shape the politics of the future outside public scrutiny – as Thiel most surely did when founding the surveillance start-ups Palantir and Anduril, whose clients today include the CIA, NSA, and FBI (Lucas 2017). Similarly, the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) that Musk leads as from January 2025 advises President Trump directly – who in turn will implement DOGE's recommendations by executive orders, thus bypassing Congress (Musk and Ramaswamy 2024). DOGE being an extra-governmental advisory committee means that Musk will avoid passing through confirmation by the Senate (Chidi 2024). What allegedly constitutes Musk's newfound expertise in federal government restructure is his brutal take-over and reorganization of Twitter/X where he cut around 80% of staff (Toh and Liu 2023). Under his far-sighted leadership, the state can be reshaped on the model of the lean startup – in the same way as his future Martian colonies and the charter cities funded by Thiel are communities modeled on the corporation (Slobodian 2023a). If, as Thiel argues, start-ups must be headed by founder-kings, so must these start-up nations.

I call this exclusive class of rulers the ‘entrepreneur-kings’ as a reference to Plato’s ‘philosopher-kings’ (Plato 1998, 190–226) – and it is in this instance telling that Thiel picked Strauss, a neo-Platonic philosopher with clearly expressed elitist views, to make his point (Thiel 2007, 204).¹⁵ Plato’s (exclusively male) philosopher-kings are destined for governing the *polis* because of their privileged relationship with eternal Truth and Beauty. Thanks to their philosophical works, they access immortality (Plato 2008). For Plato (1998), the divine soul of the philosopher is reinforced by a sound and healthy mortal body; physical qualities that contribute to differentiating the philosopher from ordinary people. In the same way, the Thielian/Muskian founder is deemed worthy of leading and reconfiguring the symbolic order because of their privileged relationship with creation that grants them access to immortality through the visions of the future they propose. Interestingly, the exceptionalism that designates the founder as the ideal modern ruler is based on an alleged superiority that is equally intellectual and physical.

Crafting exceptionalism

When fashioning their public image, Musk and Thiel present themselves as figures of exception. Thiel is particularly vocal in his rejection of sameness, and his celebration of individualism and singularity. His worldview is egalitarian at its core, with clear Social-Darwinian inflections if one considers his ‘Power Law,’ a pattern which, he thinks, organizes the ‘natural and social world’ and dictates that a ‘small few radically outstrips all rivals’ in both producing output and concentrating property (Thiel and Masters 2014, 83). He is a vocal admirer of René Girard – his former lecturer at Stanford, whose theories on mimetic desire and herd behavior he credits for helping him to foresee the potential of Facebook when he gave the social network its first outside investment (Thiel in Hardy 2015; Thiel in Streitfeld 2018). The Thiel Foundation even hosts an ‘Imitatio’ program dedicated to the French philosopher (Imitatio 2022). Drawing on Girard’s theory that imitation is part of human nature (Thiel in Hardy 2015), Thiel argues that the majority of people – the ‘crowd’ or ‘unthinking demos’ (Thiel 2009) – will have a tendency to uncritically copy what is around them; they cannot be genuine creators. In contrast, the founder stands out because of their abnormality, which is apparent in their extraordinary psychic and physical powers (Thiel and Masters 2014, 173–189).

Thiel expounds a rather bizarre theory of population distribution which asserts that normal people are in their extreme majority ‘average,’ meaning that they are neither ‘weak’ nor ‘strong,’ ‘idiot savant’ nor ‘polymath,’ ‘outsider’ nor ‘insider’ (Thiel and Masters 2014, 175). Founders, on the other hand, tend to simultaneously combine both extremes, never ‘entirely normal’ and often ‘unusual’ (2014, 174), constantly oscillating between genius and madness (2014, 184–185). They are a liminal figure. Interestingly, Thiel contends that founders’ exceptionality is both ‘natural’ and ‘nurtured’ (2014, 177): they construct their own legend by nurturing their pre-existing super-human skills and extreme traits to emphasize further their intrinsic difference.

The construction of oneself as a legend goes along with the reinvention of a heroic body. A comparison of recent photos of Musk with the photos of his ‘nerdier’ PayPal years shows how he reinvented his image to correspond to standards of hyper-masculinity with muscles and hair implants. It is, from this perspective, particularly telling that he notoriously inspired Robert Downey Jr.’s interpretation of the billionaire superhero Tony Stark in the cinema adaptation of the comic books *Iron Man* (Vance 2016, 181). The film depicts how Stark, an outstanding inventor, constructs a powered suit of armor that makes him invincible in order to overcome the limitations of his mortal body after a nearly fatal chest injury. Fiction is today caught up by reality after Musk co-founded Neuralink in 2016, a program to develop brain-computer interfaces to boost human intellectual capacities to match the development of potentially hostile Artificial Intelligences.¹⁶ These new enhanced heroic bodies of steel represent a fantasized and idealized vision of the masculine body, which must be paralleled with the strong masculine ethos at work in Silicon Valley

(Wiener 2016; Chang 2018; Little and Winch 2021). In Musk and Thiel's narratives, the entrepreneurial world is imagined as a world of men.¹⁷

Thiel's willingness to enhance human intellect and physiology with new technologies goes even further, with the risk of publicly appearing as a monster. There are countless rumors spread by Thiel himself (Bercovici 2016) about him engaging in parabiosis; that is, being injected with young people's blood to remain youthful. In addition, Thiel's financial support of libertarianism also involves funding its transhumanist fringes, as he shares their concern about the biological limitations of the human body that make it prone to death (Hughes 2012). In his quest for solutions, Thiel became particularly interested in 'the Technological Singularity';¹⁸ that is, 'an eschatological prophecy about how the advent of AI will usher (...) a merger of people and machine, and a final eradication of death' (O'Connell 2017, 17). Like many radical transhumanists, Thiel seems to fantasize about transcending a frustrating mortal (normal) biological body, to craft instead an idealized imaginary body – a body characterized by its exceptionalism, immortality, superhuman intelligence and strength. What emerges here is the divided body of the entrepreneur, a theme I develop in the second part of the article.

'Founder as victim': the two bodies of the entrepreneur

Part two examines how Thiel and Musk's triumphant visions of the all-mighty entrepreneur-king are interlaced with other narratives whose apocalyptic and paranoid tone might seem at first disconcerting. Interpreting these dissonances via psychoanalytical concepts, I demonstrate below that these two facets of the entrepreneur – ruthless overlord and threatened victim – are intrinsically connected. While fearmongering and exhibition of their suffering are used to further legitimize the founders' domination, the angst and paranoia that accompany them also signal fragilities in the persona Musk and Thiel have crafted for themselves.

Facing the 'end of the future'

As argued above, Thiel and Musk like staging themselves as challenging the status quo. Yet, it is not sufficient for Thiel and Musk to solely stress the inefficiencies of the present institutional order. They depict its static dimension as an existential threat. For instance, Thiel keeps expressing his worry for what he calls the 'end of the future,' to which he opposes 'progress' understood (in similar terms as Musk) as 'the ever-expanding universe of human knowledge' (Thiel 2011). According to him, a society's vigor and viability can be measured by its engagement in technological development. As such, Thiel is concerned by today's alleged 'technological slowdown' or 'non-acceleration' of technological progress (2011; 2023a; 2025). The manifesto that launched his Founders Fund further details his apprehension. Whereas the post-war period was characterized by extraordinary technical achievements, like walking on the moon, our current society is disappointing because human beings have lost their ability to translate their dreams into concrete technological inventions. Instead of creating flying cars, we lose time in developing useless apps and 'underpowered hybrid cars,' thus reaching 'a sort of technological end of history' (Gibney 2011). Thiel has recently extended this critique to the humanities, returning to the rationale of the infamous essay he co-authored while at Stanford, 'The Diversity Myth' (Sacks and Thiel 1995), to attack the alleged leftist 'wokeism' of universities (Thiel 2023b). Pushing the eschatological stance to its extreme in a puzzling 2023 speech to Oxford Union (and echoing similar discourses in neoliberal libertarian circles), Thiel voiced his concerns regarding the emergence of a 'one totalitarian state' (the UN), which he compared to the 'antichrist' (whose 'slogan is "peace and safety"'); he concluded by inviting his audience to fear the antichrist more than 'Armageddon' (Thiel 2023a).¹⁹

Musk's narrative takes on similar apocalyptic undertones. His biographer describes how Musk 'sees man as self-limiting and in peril' (Vance 2016, 344) and fears that 'mankind has lost much of its will to push the boundaries' (2016, 101). His concerns over potentially hostile Artificial

Intelligences articulate his anxieties concerning the decline of the human race (Friend 2016).²⁰ He has recently given this fear a new inflection by sharing on X and in interviews his anxiety regarding an alleged population collapse (Musk 2023b; 2024b) – a fear that has led him to publicly support racist and anti-immigration ‘great replacement’ conspiracy theories (Musk 2023a; 2024a; Klee 2024), as well as eugenicist theories (Marx 2023). Musk is concerned that ‘smart people’ have fewer children (quoted in Vance 2016, 358), speaking of a ‘negative Darwinian vector’ (2016, 357) and suggesting a connection between IQ (a problematic concept in itself) and genetics – a connection also revived in neoliberal circles through Charles Murray’s engagement with psychological race science in *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein and Murray 1994; Slobodian 2023b).

Both capitalists thus associate technological stagnation with the slow death of (Western) civilization. As Thiel writes, ‘in business, equilibrium means stasis, and stasis means death’ (Thiel and Masters 2014, 34). The founder’s intervention is, of course, meant to break this degenerative trend and kick-start civilization’s creative power. Their ability to disrupt and accelerate innovation processes is presented as life-asserting (see also Geiger 2020). The productive tension between stagnation and acceleration is leveraged by Musk and Thiel to heighten the stakes of their intervention; fearmongering is a way for Silicon Valley’s founders to show their personal intervention as vital. Yet, it also means that their pledges are tainted with an uncanny dimension – an anxiety about the future which they promise to suture.

Musk characteristically describes his entrepreneurial drive and his quest to ‘figure out “what does it all mean?”’ as ‘always’ animated by an ‘existential crisis’ (Musk 2012, 1). A similar unrest is apparent in Thiel’s obsessional fear of the ‘ideology of the inevitability of the death of every individual’ (Thiel in Packer 2011). Death is, according to him, the most important problem that faces humanity, a problem that has been insufficiently considered because of the general denial that is associated with it (Thiel 2015). His anxiety about warding off human decay thus motivates his continual search for innovations (Thiel and Masters 2012b). It has led Thiel to invest, personally or through the Founders Fund, in biotech start-ups targeting aging and disease, like Unity Biotechnologies, a start-up ‘developing medicines that potentially halt, slow or reverse age-associated disease’ (Founders Fund 2022).²¹

The terror of death

Thiel’s fear of death and decay and his interest in parabiosis, cryogenics, and transhumanism highlight the striking corporeal anchorage of his narration. The extreme narcissism that stands out in his depiction of his extraordinary abilities is matched by a deep anxiety about his own bodily decline. A short detour by the psychoanalytical concepts developed by Jacques Lacan is here particularly useful to critically interpret Thiel’s fear of aging.

In his analysis of human psyche, Lacan argues that the construction of the subject’s psychic personality – the ‘ego’ – is directed by the intertwinement of two ‘registers of human reality,’²² the ‘symbolic’ (which, for Lacan, refers to language and laws, and generally to all the discourses, structures and rules that organize society and human relations) and the ‘imaginary’ (which corresponds to everything that belongs to the order of the image and self-representation) (Lacan 1953; Leader 2011, 45). In doing so, these two registers attempt to keep at bay the traumatic intrusions of a third register, the ‘real,’ a radically negative order that evokes the libidinal life of the body (Leader 2011, 45). In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the incursions of the real expose the individual to the potential dissolution of all their mental and bodily representations. As such, Lacan associates the real with death (Lacan 1978, 245). Against the distressing sensory chaos that comes with the eruption of the real, the imaginary and the symbolic thus provide the subject with an (illusory) sense of self-consciousness, as well as an impression of bodily integrity and psychic coherence (Lacan 2004, 42).

Crucially, the transhumanist theories dear to Thiel are explicitly fueled by fear of death, apprehended as the slow decrepitude of the imperfect mortal body (O’Connell 2017, 40); and, thus, as a return of the Lacanian real. The fight against death is conceived by Thiel as an ‘escape’ from a

threatening and ineluctable natural destiny (Thiel 2015). The construction of a heroic legend and an immortal body described in the first part of the article must be interpreted in such a light. As argued by Ernest Becker, heroism stands as a sublimation of the ‘terror of death’ (Becker 1973, 11). Heroic individuals overcome their existential fear by always orientating themselves ‘beyond their bodies’ and ‘toward explicit immortality – ideologies, myths of heroic transcendence’ (1973, 285). Thiel and Musk’s attempt to incarnate the archetype of the mythical founder similarly coincides with their quest for immortality. When imagining themselves as the ‘entrepreneur-kings,’ the ideal rulers of a future utopian society, Musk and Thiel precisely try to transcend biological death in order to imaginarily construct themselves as immortal symbols. As Kantorowicz (1957) analyzed, medieval kings saw their body differentiated between a mortal biological body and an immortal spiritual body that symbolized dynastic continuity. Similarly, the founder’s body becomes characteristically divided between a finite and mortal body, and an imaginary and enhanced heroic body – or, to draw on Slavoj Žižek’s Lacanian reinterpretation of Kantorowicz’s theory, between a ‘visible, material, transient body and another, sublime body, a body made of a special, immaterial stuff’ (Žižek 2008, 255).²³

Suffering and sacrifice

Paradoxically, Musk’s and Thiel’s attempted transformation into a mythological archetype to escape death ends up reinforcing its presence. Another detour by Lacan’s work is useful to make sense of this. Death appears in a second instance in Lacan’s writings on the ego; this time associated with the symbolic and imaginary orders. As suggested above, for Lacan, the impression of bodily integrity and psychic coherence that the symbolic and imaginary orders secure is fundamentally illusory, but also alienating (Lacan 1978, 66). Imaginary and symbolic representations necessarily inhibit certain drives and energies, thus leaving out important dimensions of the individual’s ‘psychological reality,’ which they cannot grasp in its entirety (1978, 245). They are a cut on the subject’s personality, which Lacan associates with castration. As such, he conceptualizes them as an ‘encroachment of death on life’ (Lacan 1986, 321); that is, an intimate encounter with the possibility of death.

Thiel and Musk’s narcissistic attempts to construct themselves as the heroic figures of the founder are similarly marked by this ‘encroachment of death on life.’ This is apparent in the recurring motifs of sacrifice and suffering in their narratives, especially when trying to embody the founder’s ability to withstand risk. Tellingly, most of Musk’s counterparts, partners, and family members interviewed by Ashley Vance, his authorized biographer, agree that what differentiates Musk from the ‘mere mortals’ is his ability to ‘take an insane amount of personal risk’ (Ed Ho in Vance 2016, 80), to risk ‘more than anyone else’ (J.B. Straubel in Vance 2016, 339). Strikingly, the aptitude to take important risks is explicitly connected with Musk’s capacity to endure pain. By an interesting metonymical slippage, what Musk is said to put at stake through his risky business ventures is his own ‘major skin’ (Ed Ho in Vance 2016, 80), ‘his blood, sweat and tears’ (J.B. Straubel in Vance 2016, 339). Musk seems animated by a self-destructive drive to ‘forever pus[h] his business to the edge,’ which entails ‘abus[ing] himself by working inhumane hours’ (Vance 2016, 356). In a 2018 interview to the *New York Times*, Musk talked about his ‘excruciating’ pain and physical exhaustion after not leaving the Tesla factory for sometimes ‘three or four days’ (Musk in Gelles et al. 2018). Similarly, Thiel’s *Zero to One* complacently depicts the ‘extreme sleep deprivation’ and dubious diets that enhance the competitive instincts of the founders and their team (Thiel and Masters 2014, 42). These different accounts keep valorizing the violence that these men claim to inflict on their body and mind. Musk appears to push masochism even further and regrets that his kids ‘won’t suffer as he did,’ because he ‘feels that the suffering helped to make him who he is and gave him extra reserves of strength and will’ (Vance 2016, 357).

The mention of the entrepreneur’s willingness to suffer is certainly meant to highlight their uncommon ability to endure stress and keep functioning, and their leadership capacity to become

hyper-rational in situations of adversity (Vance 2016, 211). In a striking parallel with the protestant ethic described by Max Weber, the ability to sustain (and preach) ‘hard, continuous bodily and mental labor’ thus becomes a sign of one’s election (Weber 2001, 105).²⁴ In an environment where start-ups are meant to function like a ‘cult’ that demands total dedication from their employees (Thiel and Masters 2014, 125), suffering takes the dimension of a ritualistic sacrifice; the term ‘sacrifice’ was directly used by Musk’s first wife, Justine (in Vance 2016, 97).²⁵ It is part of a trial by ordeal in which the founders must prove they are worthy of succeeding by showing they can mentally and physically endure extreme working conditions. The mortal body of the founder is here sacrificed to be recreated as an immortal symbol.

By aiming to live forever, by consuming human blood or growth hormones, or by enhancing the body with machine parts, by accepting to become perhaps barely human, Thiel and Musk situate themselves *beyond* mortal life, and thus *beyond* life itself. This is well captured by Lacan’s interpretation (which markedly alludes to Kantorowicz’s theory of the King’s two bodies) of *Hamlet*’s cryptic dialog ‘The body is with the king, but the king is not with the body. The king is a thing. – A thing, my Lord? – Of nothing’ (Lacan 1959, 254; Žižek 2008, 255). The king stands here as the ‘manifestation of the *signifier of power* as such’ (Lacan 1959, 254; original emphasis) – that is, as discussed in the next section, what Lacan also calls the ‘Thing’ as the object of unconstrained *jouissance*. But, as Lacan writes, the king is a ‘thing of nothing’; it is a ‘sublime, evasive body (...), a pure semblance without substance’ (Žižek 2008, 255). Kantorowicz (1957) describes how, after the King’s earthly death, a life-size wax doll representing the immortal body of the deceased is made in his image, and then ceremonially fed for the whole duration of the interregnum. Although the doll, as a figure of transition, incarnates the eternity of the transcendent royal function, it is nonetheless a still and lifeless eternity, petrified in its cold representation of everlasting glory, like Thiel’s non-aging body fixed in time.

Beyond limits

The liminal dimension of the iconic entrepreneur’s personality must be reinterpreted in such light. As previously discussed, both Musk and Thiel see themselves as exceptional men with extraordinary features. They seek to prove to the world (and to themselves) that they surpass the ‘normal’ majority in their intellectual and physical abilities. They attempt to turn themselves into symbols and inspire their audience by becoming a horizon for their admirers to imitate. Through their questioning of the status quo and their personal reinvention as supermen, Musk and Thiel fantasize themselves as transgressing symbolic norms and physical constraints. As a telling example, Thiel associates the founder with a series of mythological heroes²⁶ that includes Oedipus, who Thiel describes as an ‘extreme insider’ and ‘extreme outsider’ because of his dual status of ‘king’ and transgressor of the taboo of incest (Thiel and Masters 2012a). With this imaginary parentage, Thiel links the founder to a figure that traditionally symbolizes the violation of a fundamental civilizational law (see for instance Freud 2001, 164–66) – the figure of impermissible enjoyment.

To push the interpretation further with a psychoanalytical analogy, Thiel and Musk’s obsession with bypassing limits must be read as attempts to reach what Lacan calls the ‘Thing’ as the object of unconstrained *jouissance* that lies outside the symbolic Law (Lacan 1986, 2004, 2006).²⁷ Crucially, ‘*jouissance*’ is understood by Lacan as a mix of pleasure, jubilant enjoyment, and pain. Pain marks access to the Thing, to the opening of ‘all the floodgates of desire’ (Lacan 1986, 97). As such, it is telling that the motif of suffering and pain occurs in Thiel and Musk’s narratives precisely when they are trying to incarnate the mythical figure of the entrepreneur-king, which in their fantasies comes to incarnate the signifier of power and unconstrained *jouissance*. Musk’s 2018 *New York Times* interview is again a good example. Recounting the interview, the journalists stressed Musk’s disturbing emotionality and his struggle ‘to maintain his composure’ when exposing his mental and financial difficulties (Gelles et al. 2018). Musk’s apparent breakdown may still be part of his self-curation strategies: he might here seek to humanize his public image by staging

his vulnerabilities and fragilities for his audience. Yet, I suggest that it might also signal the irruption of cracks in the heroic persona Musk crafted for himself and which he cannot ultimately sustain. Lacan claims that unmediated access to the Thing is ultimately unbearable (Lacan 1986, 97). The Thing is intrinsically connected with the real: an excessive proximity with it would cause the dissolution of all our mental constructions, explaining why, for Lacan, '*jouissance* (...) precisely implies the acceptance of death' (1986, 222).²⁸

The sacrifice of the entrepreneur-king

When trying to incarnate the entrepreneur-king, which in their fantasies symbolizes *jouissance* as power, Musk and Thiel metaphorically thus expose themselves to death. This specifically manifests in Thiel's narratives in a series of paranoid nightmarish scenarios where he imagines the founder's sacrifice by the crowd.

In his 'Founder as Victim, Founder as God' class at Stanford (Thiel and Masters 2012a), Thiel goes back to Girard's theory of mimetic desire, one of the inspirations of which, interestingly, was Freud's tale of the 'primal father' (Boothby 2001).²⁹ The idea that retains Thiel's attention is that 'mimetic desire' ineluctably leads to 'sacrificial cycles' (Thiel and Masters 2012a). Revisiting world history in a particularly cursory way, Thiel argues that all cultures have encountered cycles of unrest which end with the sacrifice of a scapegoat who 'channel[s] all the hostility.' The murder of the scapegoat restores social peace by rallying 'the crazed community' (Thiel and Masters 2012a; Thiel 2007). Out of the miscellaneous examples put forward by Thiel, one finds Oedipus and Christ, witches and kings (like Kantorowicz, Thiel is interested in the traditional proclamation 'The king is dead, long live the king!'), political figures like Marie-Antoinette, Abraham Lincoln and John Kennedy, but also cultural figures whose public execution was more metaphorical, including Britney Spears and Michael Jackson, and, of course, founders. The last part of Thiel's Stanford class is devoted to illustrating how founders – like Steve Jobs, Howard Hughes, and Bill Gates – are also perfect scapegoats in waiting.

Describing the founder as a scapegoat is a way for Thiel to reinforce his imaginary parentage with mythical figures like Oedipus and Christ as the ultimate validation of his intrinsic superiority. The vocabulary he uses to describe scapegoats ('extremely powerful'; 'omnimalevolent' and 'omnibenevolent'; 'extreme outsider' and 'extreme insider'; 'worshipped' and 'demonized') is the same as that he uses for the founder. Like in Girard's theory but also in Freud's tale of the omnipotent primordial father (who does not respect the prohibition of incest, which he simultaneously imposes on his sons [Freud 2001, 164–166]), Thiel's scapegoat must be violently suppressed because they embody power as well as a form of excessive *jouissance*. They challenge the boundaries of civilization.

In addition, Girard's and by extension Freud's theories enable Thiel to put the providential figure of the founder at the center of a new social contract. In Freud's work, the primordial father must be sacrificed for 'civilization' to emerge as a renunciation and sublimation of incest, the forbidden *jouissance* (Freud 2002). It is the remorse that seizes his sons after they murder him that makes them then submit to a disembodied law which reasserts the prohibition of incest, and which thus comes to substitute their father's will and desire, while perpetuating his authority. Similarly, Thiel turns the founder into a Christlike figure, sacrificed for the greater good of humanity by the resentful and envious mob. In so doing, the sacrificed and vilified body of the founder becomes a space in which society is to represent and decipher itself, the repository of its fantasies and hopes.

Because it sanctions his aspiration to become a modern god, Thiel is attached to the idea of the founder-scapegoat. But he seems horrified by its actual implications nonetheless – to the point of retiring in a fortified bunker in New Zealand to survive the coming apocalypse (O'Connell 2018). Thiel suggests that the 'entrepreneur-king' must find a way, like other kings before them, to postpone (or at least ritualize) their ineluctable sacrifice and hypnotize the hateful crowd (Thiel and Masters 2012a). For the founder, this entails reproducing the founding act *ad aeternam* and achieve

‘perpetual innovation’ (Thiel and Masters 2012a). We reach here the crux of Thiel’s paradoxical desire. On one hand, Thiel fantasizes about becoming a symbol, which entails the sacrifice of his mortal body. On the other hand, he seems terrified by his own death wish, and thus advocates constant activity to postpone his annihilation.

As previously discussed, pain, suffering and anxiety signal the proximity of the Thing, but also the re-emergence of the repressed real of the body – the intimate ‘non-imagined residue of the body’ (Lacan 2004, 74) – which comes to disrupt our structuring, but also alienating, ego constructions. As Thiel and Musk’s desire to become immortal gods stands as an example of a particularly extreme ego construction, it is not surprising that the immortal body into which they wish to transmute themselves exercises a violent constraint on their subjectivity. From this perspective, Thiel’s dread of bodily decline must be interpreted as signaling breaches opened by the real in his meticulously composed self-image – breaches which seem to him terrifying, but also fascinating if we consider their obsessive reiteration in his fight against mortality. Thiel’s fear of aging signals the return of the inhibited and repressed mortal body that comes to dislocate the logics of the still and inert imaginary immortal body he is trying to construct for himself.

The suspension of the entrepreneur in suffering, and his existential anxiety, remind us that Thiel and Musk’s ambitions to constitute themselves as a mythological body and their relentless effort to impersonate the archetype of the founder might actually be doomed to failure. As an archetype, the model of the founder is fundamentally impossible to attain and maintain.

Conclusion

As Elon Musk’s current meddling with elections on the American and European continents dramatically illustrates, Silicon Valley’s tech giants have proven they have the technical and financial means to shape the politics of the present and of tomorrow. They can nudge their users’ behavior in certain directions (Zuboff 2019); they can bankroll election campaigns (Pogue 2022), and they can dictate the terms of public debate through the platform they control (Seymour 2022). On a par with states, they can influence the course of wars (Copp 2023) and take part in the new space conquest, with the aim of perhaps setting up their own private space colonies in a (not so distant) future (Utrata 2024). To reinforce their power, they can count on Silicon Valley’s soft power, the gravitational force of the Californian ideology (Durand 2020; Barbrook and Cameron 1996), but also on the central place that has been given to the entrepreneur as a role model in neoliberal cultures (Dardot and Laval 2010; Brown 2015). As Susi Geiger warns, the eschatological narratives heralded by Silicon Valley’s founders and tech companies need to be attended to because of their ability to shape tomorrow’s markets by overflowing our imaginary’s horizon and silencing the surfacing of other potential futures (Geiger 2020, 180; Beckert 2016).

In this article, I have argued that we similarly need to pay attention to the political visions these narratives convey, and specifically to the way they come to performatively constitute the ‘founder’ (the entrepreneur-king) as the ideal ruler of a future post-democratic order that they are simultaneously tasked to bring about. Such work is all the more important considering that Silicon Valley’s elites have ruthlessly used their technical, financial, and cultural power to support neoreactionary fringes celebrating exit from democracy, hyper-masculinized authoritarianism, and the concentration of wealth and power (Chafkin 2021; Smith and Burrows 2021; Slobodian 2023a). As symbolized by Peter Thiel’s close relations with neoliberal libertarian think tanks or the admiration of the latter for Elon Musk’s Mars colonization plans, Silicon Valley has become a laboratory of ideas for the far right in a period where neoliberalism mutates. On top of using their cultural and financial capital to support ideas long defended in some neoliberal circles (e.g. the defense of efficient monopolies in Chicago economics), they have contributed – either through their theoretical writings (Thiel) or through the futuristic projects they advertise (Musk) – to the elaboration of neoliberal and libertarian theories of exit. It is therefore crucial to deconstruct their discursive productions to better face the future they envisage for us.

This article has focused on the self-narratives of two of these iconic entrepreneurs, Peter Thiel and Elon Musk, to examine the ways they curate their public image in an attempt to incarnate the figure of the founder. I demonstrated that the two capitalists invest the founder with a quasi-messianic political role, making the founder the vehicle and justification of their huge political ambitions. They depict, and in Thiel's case theorize, a redeemed social order in which economic success and the ability to take risks are the bases of sovereign rule. They also encourage their followers to distinguish themselves from the 'herd' by proving their creativity as well as their ability (and responsibility) to work beyond 'normal' human capacity. Spreading the entrepreneurial ethos is mainly an opportunity for Musk and Thiel to recognize their peers and delineate new social hierarchies built around the entrepreneur-king for the alternative (and post-democratic) polity they wish to create.

I used Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical theory to analyze Thiel and Musk's narratives in order to be attentive to the desires and fantasies that pervade them. My aim has been to investigate how they function as mobilizing fictions: they discursively construct an identity model – the founder – that is meant to be desirable (as a role model for personal success and as an ideal ruler) to Musk and Thiel's audience, but (as I discussed) also to themselves. The founder functions like the 'Thing' conceptualized by Lacan to designate the object/promise of unconstrained *jouissance*: it structures audiences' and narrators' fantasmatic attachments (see Jones and Spicer 2005). What Musk and Thiel do through their own example, by seemingly giving the founder flesh and blood, is to provide this category with greater fantasmatic substance, thus reinforcing its grip. They invite their admirers to identify with them and to recognize themselves in the visions of the future they are presenting them with, and thereby to emotionally (and libidinally) invest these representations.

Using a psychoanalytical framework has enabled me to also draw out the fragilities of Musk and Thiel's founder framework, as well as the latent paranoia that suffuses their narratives – also represented by Thiel's 'Founder as Victim, Founder as God' class.³⁰ Here again, thinking of the founder as the Thing enables us to understand how Musk and Thiel's attempts to incarnate this archetype ultimately result in failure. The 'founder' is fundamentally an empty category or an 'open space' that cannot be objectified (Jones and Spicer 2005, 235). Its unattainability is the support of its operation: it is what enables it to coordinate desire in the first place (2005, 236). The impossibility of becoming the iconic founder manifests itself in the contradictions and the angst that pervade Musk and Thiel's discourses. It is patent in the way their quest to go beyond the materiality of the present world and human flesh is met with an anxious and obsessive return to their self-contained body, which they fantasize as threatened and struggle to keep together – like Musk facing the gaze of the *New York Times*' journalists. Similarly, Thiel's dream of enlightened leadership ends up in a bunker in the desperate attempt to postpone his sacrifice and in the paranoid wait for the apocalypse to come.

Foregrounding the fragility of the founder model and its paranoid dimension matters, not simply to stress the vacuity of Musk's and Thiel's ambitions, but also to denaturalize the central place that has been given to the entrepreneur and their start-ups as models for the self, for society, and for the state in neoliberal cultures. It is about unsettling a (neoliberal) ontological presumption by encouraging people (to keep on a Lacanian vocabulary) to 'traverse the fantasy'; that is, to confront (instead of covering up) the lack around which these identity representations are constructed.

Notes

1. As the terms of service of Starlink (2022) stipulate, 'no Earth-based government [will have] authority and sovereignty over Martian activities'; Musk's Martian settlement will have 'self-governing principles' established at the time of settlement. Playing further with this idea, Musk participated in a 2021 skit for Saturday Night Live where he played his own role as CEO of SpaceX. Staging a life-threatening technical emergency in a future Martian colony, the skit presented Musk as heroically saving the day from SpaceX's (and not NASA's [Utrata 2022]) control room on Earth. The skit thereby contributed to naturalize the idea that future Martian settlements could be under SpaceX's (and therefore Musk's) corporate rule (Saturday Night Live 2021).

2. Musk's involvement in the Ukraine-Russia war has included the announcement on Twitter in 2022 of his peace plan for Ukraine, markedly in favour of Russia, which he tried to impose by threatening to withdraw Starlink internet terminals from Ukraine (Hern 2022). In 2023, he also cut Starlink in Crimea to stall the Ukrainian attack on Russian forces (Copp 2023).
3. According to historian of neoliberalism Dieter Plehwe, the Mont Pèlerin Society (created in 1947) and its 'related network of partisan think tanks' (to which the FEE, the AEC, and the Cato Institute all belong) serve 'as a directory of organised neoliberalism': they bring together scholars, politicians, journalists, corporate leaders, and knowledge professionals all united by their hostility to collectivism and their ambition to rebuild liberalism on new bases (Plehwe 2009, 5–6). The connections between Silicon Valley and the MPS predate Thiel. The cyber-gurus of the 1980s and 1990s, like Esther Dyson and George Gilder, were vocal admirers of neoliberal thinkers and MPS members like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman (McAteer 2022; Durand 2020, 34–35; see also Barbrook and Cameron 1996; Turner 2010).
4. One can also mention Eric Ries' *Lean Startup* (2011), Paul Graham's essays (2022), or Sam Altman's and Elon Musk's X/Twitter accounts. *Zero to One* was co-authored by Thiel's former student and future collaborator, Blake Masters. The book revised notes that Masters took during Thiel's 2012 Stanford seminar series on start-ups, which Masters published on his personal blog (Masters 2012).
5. Wendy Liu's 2020 memoir *Abolish Silicon Valley*, recounting Liu's failed attempt to build a start-up like her founder idols, provides a good immersion into these emulators' chimerical hopes.
6. Interestingly, this passage of Hayek's *Constitution of Liberty* is quoted by FEE Fellow Saul Zimet in another article defending Musk's visionary input and his rightful privileges (Zimet 2021).
7. *Zero to One* and Thiel's 2012 classes at Stanford stand as examples of this ambition. Besides, Thiel clearly likes playing on his philosophy credentials. On top of his frequent references to philosophers like Nietzsche, Leo Strauss, or René Girard, he has written short contributions for academic journals (Thiel 2008; 2015) and edited collections (Thiel 2007).
8. Geiger (2020, 170) defines eschatology in its secular usage as signalling 'both the fulfilment of time and the opening up of a new and better future.'
9. At the time of writing, Musk is the richest man in the world. He is followed by Amazon and Blue Origin's founder, Jeff Bezos, and Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg (Forbes 2025).
10. On the topic of coloniality, one should note that Thiel is a firm believer in the theory of the clash of civilisations (with markedly orientalist views of China and 'Islam') (Thiel 2007; Thiel and Robinson 2020). Musk's family was embedded in the South African apartheid's economy (Vance 2016).
11. Thiel boasts that the engineer shared his plan during a team meeting and was dissuaded to carry on by 'calmer heads' (Thiel and Masters 2014, 42). Confinity and X.com offered similar online payment systems and merged under X.com's flagship, keeping the name PayPal for their online payment service (Chafkin 2021, 66–67). The merger did not end warfare: soon after, Thiel and Max Levchin staged a successful coup to replace Musk as CEO while Musk was flying to his honeymoon and could not retaliate (Vance 2016, 87–88).
12. The COVID-19 pandemic provided illustrations of Musk's autocratic management. He defied health authorities by reopening his Californian Tesla factory while the state was in official lockdown (Siddiqui and Dawsey 2020). Workers who did not come back to work (and took unpaid leaves instead) were reported to have had their contracts terminated (Siddiqui 2020), despite Tesla's prior commitments.
13. Thiel provided funding for Friedman's Seasteading Institute and Pronomos venture capital firm (which funds charter cities around the world) (Shugerman 2023), and for Yarvin's Tlon (which oversees Urbit) (Chafkin 2021, 205; Smith and Burrows 2021).
14. Kaczynski was an American former mathematics professor who embraced a nature-centred form of anarchism. A fervent critic of modern technology (see his manifesto, 'Industrial Society and Its Future' [1995]), he led a bombing campaign from 1978 to 1995. The mailed bombs targeted scientists, engineers, and representatives of industries. Three people were killed and twenty-three injured.
15. Thiel stresses Strauss's ambition to write 'esoterically' to be understood by 'intelligent' readers only (2007, 204).
16. Musk and his then-partner, the musician Grimes, named their first born, 'X Æ A-XII,' illustrating again Musk's attraction for the idea of merging the human with the machine (the A-12 being an aircraft). Considering that a number of Musk's corporations have 'X' in their names (e.g. X, SpaceX, X.com), Musk peculiarly seems here to literally brand his son.
17. Elizabeth Holmes, the disgraced founder of Theranos, offers a telling example of the masculine ethos at work. To craft her entrepreneurial persona, she was rumoured to have adopted a fake deep baritone voice, along with a 'Steve Jobs'-like black turtleneck uniform (Jarvis 2019). Similarly, Wendy Liu confesses that she had internalised the conclusion that 'feminine traits were inferior,' and modelled her behaviour in consequence (2020, 32). These examples are to be contrasted with a parallel feminine version of entrepreneurship, as represented by personalities like Sheryl Sandberg, Marissa Mayer, or Gwyneth Paltrow, which capitalises on what it promotes as positive feminine values for a more sustainable market – relationality, emotionality, care, motherliness.

18. For instance, Thiel was on the board of the defunct Singularity Institute for Artificial Intelligence (O'Brien 2007).
19. More recently in the *Financial Times*, Thiel compared Trump's second administration to an 'apocalypse' – here understood 'in the original sense of the Greek word *apokálypsis*, meaning "unveiling"' (Thiel 2025). According to Thiel, the new Trump administration will force the 'ancien regime' to reveal its 'secrets,' from the assassination of President Kennedy to an alleged conspiracy of US National Institutes of Health during the COVID-19 pandemic.
20. In addition to Neuralink, Musk teamed with Sam Altman, another prominent figure of Silicon Valley obsessed with human degeneracy, to found OpenAI, which aims to develop forms of AI friendly to humans (Friend 2016) and has launched ChatGTP. Musk left OpenAI's board in 2018.
21. Thiel also funded Aubrey de Grey's Methuselah Foundation, a non-profit organisation that develops regenerative treatments to extend life (O'Connell 2017).
22. All translations of Lacan's works are my own.
23. The theme of the dual body is present in other testimonies by aspiring founders, like Wendy Liu's, who recounts her uneasiness with the 'physical impediments' of her female body that she wanted to 'transcend.' She writes, 'if I couldn't literally escape my body, then at least I could seek refuge in the mind. Through preserving my achievements on the Internet, I could attain a kind of virtual immortality denied to those grounded solely in the flesh' (2020, 24).
24. As Weber writes, the protestant ethic stipulates that short nights ('six at the most eight hours') are essential to 'make sure of one's election' (2001, 104). Conversely, the 'unwillingness to work is symptomatic of the lack of grace' (2001, 105).
25. The motifs of pain and sacrifice as ordealic mechanisms are also explicit in Wendy Liu's description of how she started to believe that 'suffering would make [her] stronger' (2020, 109), and of how willing she and her partners were to 'sacrifice [their] youth at the altar of start-up success' (2020, 127) by working around the clock. Start-up success is an 'all-consuming quest' (2020, 129).
26. Other examples include Romulus (a fratricide) and Achilles.
27. The name 'Thing' is also a reference to Freud's concept of 'das Ding,' as well as to Hamlet's 'king'/'thing-of-nothing' pun
28. Hamlet, for instance, always restrains from actually striking his stepfather Claudius, the king/Thing, until he knows he is himself dying (Lacan 1959, 254).
29. In *Totem and Taboo* (2011, 164-166), Freud imagines a tribe dominated by a 'primordial father,' who exclusively disposes of all the females. He systematically kills or banishes his sons to ensure that none of them enjoy any of his sexual privileges. His excesses become so unbearable to his sons that they end up allying themselves to kill their father to gain access to all what they desired. Seized with remorse, they submit to a disembodied law which reasserts the prohibition of incest.
30. Interestingly, the section on Girard's theory of the scapegoat, which is part of class 18 on Masters' blog, has been expunged from the corresponding chapter in *Zero to One* (2014).

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