Pleasure Domes and Sunbeams: An Anti-Oedipal Reading of “Kubla Khan”

Abstract

Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s 1797 poem “Kubla Khan” begins with the statement that Kubla Khan once caused a pleasure-dome to come into existence by dint of a kingly decree. The last line states that the narrator, should he gain sufficient poetic vision, would have “drunk the milk of paradise” and would “build that dome in air.” A new reading may be derived from a focus on precisely what these lines say and what they imply within the perspective of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s work *Anti-Oedipus*. If the process of the narrator’s gaining poetic insight is set in motion by a conscious decree from Kubla Khan, then an Anti-Oedipal reading considers whether the end result is simply the consequence a powerful individual’s wishes, or else is paradoxically a liberation from those wishes.

One of the most intriguing literary works of the British Romantic era, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s 1797 poem “Kubla Khan” has invited a wealth of interpretation through the years, and continues to do so to this day. Many interpretations tend to focus on the creative process, with Coleridge himself offering significant impetus – albeit indirect – in his later literary criticism and philosophic speculation. Though Coleridge did not explicate “Kubla Khan” in works such as *Biographia Literaria*, he nonetheless lent clues that certain processes beneath the surface of cognition were at work in the creation of poetry. The purpose of the present study is to delve once again into these mental processes, although this time with reference to the work of the French postmodernist philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and with particular reference to *Anti-Oedipus*, the first of their two-volume work *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

The best place to start in a project aimed at linking Anti-Oedipus to “Kubla Khan” is a simple paraphrase of the latter, not because the poem is unfamiliar (for it is certainly not so), but rather because a paraphrase will selectively emphasize the points I consider to be important for an Anti-Oedipal interpretation. As virtually every student of poetry knows, the poem begins with a statement in somewhat convoluted syntax that Kubla Khan has caused a pleasure-dome to
come into existence. The focus immediately shifts to that which lies beneath the dome, complete with a graphic description of the river that runs adjacent before it submerges beneath the ground to run through subterranean caverns, past sunless seas and caves of ice, and presumably within hearing distance of voiced ancestral beings of some sort that foretell war. The latter voices seem to be the only phenomena that make it back from the subterranean world to Kubla in his pleasure-dome, and no more is thereafter said of either Kubla or the voices. The reader is briefly assured that the vision of this place is startling and sublime, and then the focus is shifted to a presumably separate vision of a dulcimer maid with entrancing songs, and finally to a statement by the narrator that, should he ever achieve the artistic voice that would do justice to the dulcimer maid, he would become so filled with insight that he would himself be as startling an entity to others as those things he had seen in his vision or visions.

Of course, the poem does not begin with the words “In Xanadu,” but rather with a brief note in which Coleridge relates the circumstances of his original vision. Every bit as cryptic as the poem itself, the note explains that the author had fallen into a dream after taking medication for “a slight indisposition,” and that the dazzling things he had seen during three hours of sleep were worthy of 300 lines of poetry. Upon awakening, he immediately began writing down the contents of his dream, and presumably did so in the lines of iambic tetrameter verse that he eventually published. However, he was interrupted from his writing by the infamous “person on business from Porlock” after having jotted down only a few dozen lines, and was never able to finish the poem (“Kubla Khan,” 295–296). 3

In sum, “Kubla Khan” delves deeply into the realms of the unconscious or pre-conscious, and does so a century before Sigmund Freud codified the workings of the human psyche in his psychoanalytic theories. And as mentioned at the beginning, Coleridge himself provided no small impetus in his later prose works with stories such as the cleaning girl who took ill with a brain fever and suddenly gained the ability to converse in languages that she had never studied. Coleridge provides a ready explanation in the possibility that the girl’s previous employee, a Classically-trained priest, occasionally did oral recitations to keep his language skills sharp. Having casually overheard these recitations, the girl had somehow achieved high fluency in some dark recess of her brain, and her multilingualism had manifested itself during her illness (Coleridge Biographia…, 66–67). With intriguing insights such as this, it is no wonder that the Coleridge critic John Livingston Lowes devoted more than 600 pages in his intricate work The Road to Xanadu to the associations that can be made between Coleridge’s reading and his imagery.

As I argued in an earlier paper, the Lowes procedure is quite formidable in explaining many of the arcane references in “Kubla Khan,” but not so convincing in explaining the progress of the overall poem through its 54 lines (Tindol 11–12). Because my other paper centered on cultural hybridization and on explaining why
the setting involved an almost mythical place a long time ago in a faraway land, I now wish to focus more intensely on the action itself with particular emphasis on precisely what Kubla decreed and why his decrees should have had such startling effects. But first it is necessary to provide a background to the parts of Anti-Oedipus that will figure into my analysis.

One of the more noteworthy theoretical flowerings of the anti-establishment 1960s in general and the tumultuous May 1968 protests in particular, Anti-Oedipus is at least in small part an answer to why the latter events proceeded in such a counter-intuitive way. One would normally expect an agitated group of protestors who were fed up with the conservative establishment to gravitate toward the Left, but to the perplexity of many French intellectuals at the time, this did not occur. As noted by Ian Buchanan in his useful guidebook on Anti-Oedipus, both Deleuze and Guattari were also somewhat blindsided by the events, but later came to see May 1968 as something quite different from aligning oneself with one political ideology or another – to wit, “the liberation of desire itself.” Nonetheless, such fresh moments may prove to be short-lived due to the imminent possibility that “the doctrinal turn that accompanied it [would] promise the incarceration of desire all over again” (Buchanan 8).

In other words, we humans have a strong tendency to acquiesce to power, and we do so because we have been socialized to yield to some entity or individual or principality that makes us feel more secure. Even the psychoanalysts do this – the very individuals who spend their lives in introspection and in seeking a way to remove the boot of psychic oppression from the neck of the discomfited and maladjusted – and they have done so for more than a century, since Sigmund Freud himself codified the structure of authority under the symbol of the mythical figure Oedipus. As the myth makes clear, especially the version employed by Sophocles in Oedipus Tyrannous, Oedipus pays a heavy price for discombobulating his family dynamic by marrying his mother and killing his father. And not only has he paid the penalty, but the events that transpire have been foreordained with those who have the insight and the inclination to worry about such things. Thus, the moral of the story is that we will very likely pay a high and very predictable price for getting out of line in manifesting our desires. Better to remain in conformity by purging whatever beasts dwell within us, and to do so by acquiescing in a “proper” family dynamic that is sanctioned by the family members themselves, by society, and even by the psychoanalytic establishment.

However, there are tantalizing reasons to believe that Oedipus as a metaphor for conformity does very little to address the desires that arise from NON-conformity, much less to the nature of desire itself. Furthermore, the means by which Oedipus emerges as a metaphor tends to track very closely to the development of modern capitalism as demonstrated by Karl Marx – and hence the title of the series, Capitalism and Schizophrenia. That is, Deleuze and Guattari believe that a similarity exists between the manner in which familial dynamics tend to
hammer individuals into conformity, and the ways that the individuals with money to invest tend to join into brokered relationships with those who are only able to provide their labor to a productive effort. Furthermore, this relationship can be traced in various works of the imagination, and thus provides an interesting perspective to literary criticism.

This is not to say that an Anti-Oedipal analysis interprets poetry as the workings of a schizophrenic mind, or that the product itself is the sort of thing that one would encounter in a mental institution. Rather, the idea is that schizophrenia possesses some interesting similarities to the state of affairs by which an individual somehow manages to work free of the social restrictions that tend to keep him or her in conformity. As Deleuze/Guattari explain, “[w]hat the schizophrenic experiences, both as an individual and as a member of the human species, is not at all any one specific aspect of nature, but nature as a process of production” (3). In other words, we can better evaluate the true essence of things by going to the basics of the individual truncated from the socializing forces that inevitably turn most of us into “normal” human beings. Thus, in contemplating a text that involves an entity associated with power – and this would include Kubla Khan, who was the emperor of China during the Yuan Dynasty – it is productive to look at the foundation of desire that somehow informs the text, and do so with the intention of unpacking how it enters into the process of production.

The promise, then, is to investigate “Kubla Khan” with a fresh eye that is focused on the manner in which the Chinese emperor of Mongolian ethnicity enacts the productive forces that result in a visionary insight metaphorized by dulcimer maids, subterranean caverns, prophetic voices from the unknown depths, and narrators with flashing eyes and floating hair. Furthermore, the goal is to determine whether observers without the power of Kubla Khan somehow gain the independence of poetic vision through Kubla’s decree, or else if they are merely seeing the things that they are socialized to see when the entity in charge deigns to exercise his benevolence with a pleasure dome. In short, is Coleridge telling us that we can best gain poetic vision by acceding to the powers that be, or that there are ways to break entirely free and see the nature of things with fresh eyes?

To quote Deleuze/Guattari once again,

For reading a text is never a scholarly exercise in search of what is signified, still less a highly textual exercise in search of a signifier. Rather it is a productive use of the literary machine, a montage of desiring-machines, a schizoid exercise that extracts from the text its revolutionary force. (106)

To explain these unconventional images, it is probably sufficient to look at the front cover of the Penguin Classics edition of Anti-Oedipus, which features a color painting by Doctor Kahn titled “Man as the Palace of Industry.” The painting is a cutaway of a human torso, with all its internal organs (brain included)
consisting of various machines, laboratory contraptions, cogs, wheels, conveyor belts, crankshafts, and what-have-you. The idea is that a human is best not thought of as a unified, primordial essence from which all significance arises, but rather a complicated mish-mash of various components that have gone into the works, some undoubtedly being precision devices carefully deployed, and others rather inefficient and happenstance.

Such is the case with the despot. Is he an enlightened ruler or a barbarian? One thing is certain: others have gone before him. Just as the inner workings of an individual in the Kahn painting appear as a Rube Goldberg device, so will the antecedents of Kubla Khan amalgamate the workings of his Mongolian and Han forebears. With this in mind, the reading of “Kubla Khan” must begin with a deliberation of the man himself and precisely how he figures into the world he perpetuates.

The subchapter from *Anti-Oedipus* titled “The Barbarian Despotic Machine” is especially pertinent to a reading of “Kubla Khan,” for the thirteenth century of the Common Era is not only the age in which Kubla Khan lived out his life, but it is also coincidentally the period that Deleuze/Guattari identify as a time in which capitalism was at least a possibility in China because of certain prerequisite conditions. Quoting the economist Etienne Balazs, Deleuze/Guattari point out that the despotic order which existed at the time simply did not yet allow the “decoded flows – flows or production, but also mercantile flows (*flux marchands*) of exchange and commerce that might escape the State monopoly” (197). Again, Deleuze/Guattari are not addressing “Kubla Khan,” but they nonetheless have the Yuan Dynasty in mind, and this is what makes Kubla Khan’s decree within Coleridge’s poem an interesting elucidation of the argument.

1. **First Reading: Kubla Khan and “the Barbarian Despotic Machine”**

As we have already seen, the despot has a great deal of power but not necessarily a comparable amount of originality when it comes to instituting his new order. But a certainty is that the machinations will be paranoid in nature, to introduce yet another word which is quite complicated and nuanced in Deleuze/Guattari’s work. To clarify the difference at the pain of oversimplification, paranoia in Deleuze/Guattari is associated with the overreactions that one often observes in those referred to as “reactionaries.” These are the individuals who are not only socialized to acquiesce to authority, but may even go out of their way to invest themselves emotionally in the struggle. The schizophrenic, by contrast is memorably described by Deleuze/Guattari as the individual whose concerns about the external world are largely limited to the “sunbeams in his ass” (2) and who therefore has no inclination to act as an enabler to either authorities in power or to the status quo of the “establishment” that they strive to maintain.
The paranoid is effectively the opposite of the schizophrenic, and thus invested particularly strongly in building a socius that follows a rigid order of construction and implementation. Regardless of the specifics of the world the despot builds, the results are similar in the following regard:

It is this force of projection that defines paranoia, this strength to start again from zero, to objectify a complete transformation: the subject leaps outside the intersections of alliance-subject of a deterritorialized knowledge that links him directly to God and connects him to the people. For the first time, something has been withdrawn from life and from the earth that will make it possible to judge life and to survey the earth from above: a first principle of paranoiac knowledge. (Deleuze and Guattari 194)

One would thus expect Kubla Khan’s decree to have wide-ranging consequences in the construction of a socius. With this in mind, there is no more important word in “Kubla Khan” than the word “decree” in the very first sentence. It is probably worthwhile at this to quote the first few lines of the poem:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girded round
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.5

We note first that very little is said about the pleasure-dome and absolutely nothing about its interior or function, even though Coleridge’s sources (most directly Samuel Purchas, but ultimately, Marco Polo) provided a detailed description. Furthermore, many of the images in this first stanza are not really Kubla Khan’s doing: the sacred river Alph, for example, is taken to be a natural stream that very likely adds to the charm of the pleasure-dome, but is in no way constructed for its enhancement. Likewise, the forests ancient as greenery are attractions to the site, but chosen rather than originated by the site’s architects. The gardens, on the other hand, may be artificially manicured and may also contain planted and cultivated trees placed there for their nice fragrance. But even then, the ultimate purpose is to introduce natural elements to further enhance the appeal of the pleasure-dome.

Thus, Kubla may have built the pleasure-dome, but its surroundings incorporate pre-existing structures that Kubla inherited with his kingdom. The dazzled guests of Kubla may thus wander through the grounds of the imperial city, which are surrounded by ten miles of walls, and then relax later in the pleasure-dome.
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with refreshments, entertainment, engaging conversation, and whatever other pleasurable pursuits one might conceive of occurring in a pleasure-dome. Moreover, the dome is “stately,” but this can also be seen as a play on words. As Deleuze/Guattari have told us, the State or the Urstaat “is the basic formation, on the horizon throughout history” (217). The Genghis Khans and Kubla Khans may come and go, but the State is the true primordial force that underpins their realms. What is unique at a given moment in time, however, is the specific pleasure-dome that the dictator has built. Like Kafka’s Great Wall, the pleasure dome may be constructed of bricks from older buildings and structures, but the mortar that holds it all together is the process of desire-production itself.

Buchanan’s aforementioned guidebook explains that the traditional Marxist formula MCM’ is analogous to the three syntheses of Deleuze/Guattari (Buchanan 54‒58). If we redirect our attention to the economic reading – and the Deleuze/Guattari series is titled Capitalism and Schizophrenia, after all – we observe that Kubla Khan’s building of the dome is akin to the first “M” in MCM,’ where “M” is the original instantiation of a material value that is suitable for investment, “C” is the redesignation of this material value as capital that can be invested, and “M’’” is the transformation of the first “M” by means of commodification so as to engender new investment opportunities. Buchanan is especially helpful in explaining that the symbiotic relationship between the capitalist with money to invest and the laborer with work to invest occurs at the very first step. Drawing attention to Deleuze/Guattari’s “assemblage of milk-producing mouth and suckling breast” as the “standard image for this process,” Buchanan observes “that the synthesis of connection is an abstract process which can be found literally everywhere” (57). That is to say, the complexities of capitalist interactions in the world are structurally congruent to the most basic and fundamental manifestations of the human organism. Is investing in complicated derivatives really the same as breast-feeding? In Deleuze/Guattari’s argument, the answer is that they are similar.

The question of how this pertains to Kubla Khan’s pleasure dome therefore hinges on precisely what effect the dome has on the individuals within his political orbit. Probably the simple answer is that Kubla Khan commissioned a group of architects, landscapers, builders and artisans to construct a pleasure dome, that the resulting edifice had some value beyond what he paid for it, and that he then possessed new money to fund other projects and further increase his wealth. The problems with this view are twofold: first, there is absolutely nothing to be found about this joint venture in the poem itself, much less anything about what the pleasure-dome actually did to benefit Kubla Khan; and second, that an overtly materialist reading of the poem undermines the clearly stated facts that the effects of the pleasure-dome, though quite indirect, are spiritual in nature.

Underscoring this latter point is the fact that the poem immediately moves from the dome itself to the primal forces that lie beneath. The second stanza begins with the word “but” to emphasize that the reader must get beyond what Kubla
has accomplished— and even beyond what he and his hired laborers have joined forces to accomplish—in order to fully appreciate the fruits of the pleasure-dome. In other words, the fruits of the labor/investment are the same as the ultimate social benefit in a certain way, but independent in other ways. What this means is that Kubla is simply not in control of that which animates and valuates his construction:

But oh! That deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! As holy and enchanted
As e’er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!

This second stanza continues for a total of 25 lines, all devoted entirely to description of the wondrous supernatural things beneath the pleasure-dome. Whether Kubla has deliberately placed his dome in such a place, whether it is pure happenstance, or whether all such constructions are topographically associated with primal forces, remains ambiguous. But the reader nonetheless discovers that Kubla was at least aware of the subterranean goings-on, because he hears “ancestral voices prophesying war” near the end of the central stanza.

But even though Kubla is an emperor, he seemingly has no greater control over these primal elements than anyone else, and thus is no more empowered than any other observer to make anything of the “woman wailing for her demon-lover.” Although generations of scholars have proffered explanations for this line, the relevance of this simile to an Anti-Oedipal reading can be reduced to a simple observation that sexual desires, whatever their nature, are part of the constitution of the metaphorical “pleasure-dome.” In other words, Kubla is not the prime mover creating desire, but in a given point in time is the agent responsible for the unique circumstances in which desires are integrated into the socius. One must also consider that the woman, though associated with another place under a waning moon, is employed as a simile to explain the holiness and enchantment of the subterranean realms beneath the pleasure-dome. Tantalizing musings over why, precisely, the woman would want to take on a demon-lover are thus irrelevant to this reading. What is important is that such instances are part of the many expressions of human desire that become part of the mix when Kubla decrees his dome and causes it to come into existence.

Note that the preceding line brings up another point that is perhaps often overlooked, but nonetheless of importance to an Anti-Oedipal reading: the “decree” of Kubla Khan is not the same as the “construction” of the dome. The latter requires the employment of contractual laborers who may have not had much choice in their labors, but are nonetheless the beneficiaries of Kubla’s favors. The crucial point is that these favors are both direct payment within the traditional Marxist understanding of the interaction between the capitalist and the contract laborer, but also
the inadvertent benefits that may or may not be linked to the capitalist’s schemes for accumulating new capital to fuel future projects. This, in fact, is the determining factor as to whether we interpret the overall enterprise of the dome-construction as a standard effort to indoctrinate or “Oedipalize” society, or one that inadvertently contains the elements that could society free, given the proper circumstances.

If the former, then Kubla is working on the traditional Marxist formula of MCM,’ where his “decreeing” the pleasure-dome is a fundamental bringing-together of the moneys and labors that can bring the project to fruition. Once the pleasure-dome is a commodity, it then engenders the “synthesis of disjunction,” which Buchanan explains as “[s]ocial differentiation, which presupposes the existence of capital” (63). He interprets this to mean that capital has the unique power “to portray itself, and not the sweat of labor that enabled it to come into being in the first place, as the real enabling force in contemporary society” (62). In other words, the “M” in the first step of the Marxist formula is the first step that allows differentiation between the ruling class and the workers to come into being, and also provides the mechanism by which capitalism manages to make the spurious argument that the problems that emerge in society are best fixed by additional capitalism. Thus, M’ follows as the “synthesis of conjunction.” How to best fix the problems that capitalism has created, although the capitalists by no means admit that their activities have indeed created the problem? The answer is simply more capital, more investment in either follow-up or new enterprises, and more commodification.

But is this what happens in Xanadu? Again, it is necessary to turn to the third section of the poem, which changes tone and perspective and clearly identifies a narrator that identifies closely with the casual observer. The narrator begins by describing as best as he can a dulcimer maid who plays an enchanting music that presumably invokes much of the mystery and wonder of the subterranean caverns in the second stanza. At any rate, the observer laments the fact that he cannot totally recall the music (for he is describing a vision), because to do so would provide him a new benefit of obvious social worth. To wit, he would gain the admiration and awe of those in his midst:

To such a deep delight ’twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!

The narrator thus would become the ultimate beneficiary of the process, much like a capitalist who has managed to save back a sufficient amount of money that is not earmarked for basic living expense so that he can become a capitalist himself. This is not to say, however, that the Anti-Oedipal interpretation of Kubla Khan resolves the ending of the poem as yet another “Ponzi scheme” by which we lowly workers are enticed to spend our hard-earned money on the often
hopeless goal of making more money. For one thing, the narrator does not succeed in becoming his idealized persona, and in fact cannot quite avoid romanticizing the outcome even if he did succeed:

And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

The antecedent of the pronoun “them” in the first line is the sunny dome and caves of ice, which the narrator has metaphorically recreated by fully incorporating the music of the dulcimer maid. Thus, the narrator’s newly-constructed pleasure-dome is coupled with the subterranean realm. The logic runs as thus: “Kubla Khan built a dome that offered visionary insight as one of its inadvertent pleasures. If I consume this commodity, then I will turn around and use it as capital to finance my own new dome. The process will then repeat itself, and those who see me in the glory of my newfound visionary insight will presumably gain the capital they need to build future domes.”

This first reading of “Kubla Khan” therefore resolves the decree as a manifestation at a specific point in time that ultimately preserves the social status quo. Kubla’s dome may be the construction that provides the narrator with the desire to build his own dome if he can gain the poetic vision to do so, but even Kubla’s edifice has its precursors. Once he has completed his dome he hears the voices of his ancestors, and the prophecies of war may be one of two things: the stories of wars that took place after the ancestors ended their lives but before Kubla began his (in other words, tales of wars in the past), or prophecies as warnings of what will come in Kubla’s future. If the latter, then perhaps the most expedient solution is to continue building pleasure-domes to distract the restless natives, prevent their discontentment, and engender them with a desire to protect the homeland from the barbarians who would destroy their way of life and despoil their pleasure domes.

What is therefore called for? Additional pleasure-domes, of course. The promise of capitalism is a world in which good things are built with capital to such an extent that negative forces are thereby crowded out of existence. The astute observer may at first possess some skepticism – after all, they would shout “Beware” if the narrator were to comes along with his new pleasure-dome and caves of ice – but they would soon come around and accept their socialization and acquiesce in their role as good components of the capitalist system. Kubla Khan will eventually die, of course, but the system will perpetuate itself and eventually purge itself of negative influences, all at the same time that it conveniently denies that the system in any way compounds its own problems.
Readers of *Anti-Oedipus* will recognize the sunbeam reference as originating from Daniel Paul Schreber, a judge who wrote a famous book about his mid-career onset of psychosis. In the book, Schreber describes the highly delusional episodes that came to dominate his life. At one point he comments on the effects of the sun’s rays on his body, which leads to the bald statement on page 2 of *Anti-Oedipus* that “Judge Schreber has sunbeams in his ass.”

Deleuze/Guattari seem to privilege the Judge Schreber comment for two reasons: one, to highlight the type of dissociative thinking that can be regarded as running counter to the socialization that they believe to dominate modern capitalist society; and two, to counter Sigmund Freud, the individual responsible for codifying Oedipus as the standard by which this socialization is judged within the psychoanalytic arena. Freud, though he did not psychoanalyze Judge Schreber, nonetheless concluded that the underlying reason for Schreber’s madness was his unresolved conflicts with his father (Buchanan 34–35). The relevance for the present study is that schizophrenia presents a decoupling from the forces of socialization that Freud collocated as the Oedipal Conflict, and thus poses an interesting question of whether the Kubla Khan of Coleridge’s poem is somehow analogous to Judge Schreber.

As Deleuze/Guattari explain, schizophrenia “is not at all any one specific aspect of nature, but nature as a process of production” (3). This insight leads to a somewhat variant reading of the opening lines of “Kubla Khan,” which as we have already seen, involves a decree but also an amalgamation of natural with contrived elements. The opening lines will be stated once again for convenience:

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In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round;
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.
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If we stipulate for just a moment that perhaps the individual mentioned at the beginning of the poem is crazy, we nonetheless discover that very little of the various things described are affected in the slightest degree by his madness. Even assuming that the pleasure-dome and the walls and towers are the sorts of things that only a crazy man would build, one nonetheless sees little effect on
the sacred river, or the caverns, or even any evidence that the emperor’s madness has corrupted the nature that animates and beautifies the garden and the fertile ground enclosed by the walls and towers.

Still, Kubla has indeed decreed something, and insofar as it is within his power to bring his desires to pass, he demonstrates the very sort of effect on the world that is described by the Marxist formula of MCM.’ In other words, it does not really matter if the individual commissioning the wall is sane or not; the very fact that he is able to put up some sort of capital and employ the labors of those who are willing to sell their labor and enter into a productive synthesis will still result in a surplus value that may indeed be peculiar, but still a surplus value in which the capitalist has exerted his will and which moves on to the next step of connective disjunction. In fact, Kubla’s putative insanity might even be an instigator of future investment. It would be left to Kubla’s heirs to revitalize the Yuan Dynasty through the commissioning of follow-up projects at Xanadu.

What emerges is the compelling insight that the Anti-Oedipal is perhaps not invested in the performative. J. L. Austin’s *How To Do Things With Words*, which defines performative language as those statements which cause action to occur in reality, can be applied to Kubla Khan’s decree. A crucial factor in performative language is that someone, somewhere, in some physical capacity, has to take physical actions to render the statement into a change in circumstances. Austin himself stated this necessity:

> The uttering of the word is, indeed usually a, or even the, leading incident in the performance of the act (of betting or what not), the performance of which is also the object of the utterance, but it is far from being usually, even if it is ever the sole thing necessary if the act is to be deemed to have been performed. Speaking generally, it is always necessary that the circumstances in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, appropriate, and it is very commonly necessary that either the speaker himself or other persons should also perform certain other actions, whether ‘physical’ or ‘mental’ actions or even acts of uttering further words. (8; original emphasis)

This is the case for Kubla’s decree to build a pleasure-dome. If his decree results in consequent actions, then his decree is simply the action of a ruler regardless of his state of mental health.

What this means is that we can only envision Kubla slipping out of the process of capitalist production if his words have no effect. Just as Deleuze/Guattari’s observation from page 2 of *Anti-Oedipus* that “Judge Schreber has sunbeams in his ass” has no meaning in the physical word, neither would Kubla’s statement that he wishes to decree a pleasure dome have any physical meaning if he is merely thinking about possibilities and not giving out construction orders. The obvious problem with this reading is that Coleridge’s poem provides absolutely
no clue that Kubla is merely exercising himself in a poetic reverie by imagining the building of a pleasure-dome. For one thing, the poem is based on historic documents – particularly those of Marco Polo, who knew Kubla Khan personally and visited his palaces and pleasure-dome on various occasions – which leave us little choice other than to conclude that the pleasure-dome, at the least, was a real construction. Thus it is difficult to regard the decree of Kubla as merely an inward musing that has no real impact on commodity production. And besides, Deleuze/Guattari seemingly discount the possibility that even a metaphorization could have no impact on the real world if it were circulated as a myth:

For myth and tragedy are systems of symbolic representations that still refer desire to determinate exterior conditions as well as to particular objective codes – the body of the Earth, the despotic body – and that in this way confound the discovery of the abstract or subjective substance. (300)

It would seem that the building of a pleasure-dome is not dissociative enough to qualify as the sort of schizophrenic free-wheeling that undermines representation. A pleasure-dome is simply not a sunbeam, and certainly not one directed toward the part of the anatomy that Judge Schreber highlights.

On the other hand, another scenario would perhaps put the Anti-Oedipal in play by assuming that Kubla indeed brings desire-productive forces into existence, but has no power beyond his immediate efforts. Whether or not Kubla is acting as a madman would therefore make no difference: the consequences of the pleasure-dome construction would proceed independently, and Kubla would have no further role in the matter. Such a possibility can be supported with an interpretation of the text which assumes the overhearing of the ancestral voices as being entirely coincidental to the building of the dome itself. Kubla hears the ancestral voices, in other words, and these take over the role of desire-production, including but not culminating with the ethereal song of the dulcimer maid (for it the ancestral voices have nothing to do with her, then the inclusion of the voices would be mere ornament), and proceeding to the inspiration of the narrator. However, in such an Anti-Oedipal reading, surplus value would still exist, which still would not take us away from the Marxist MCM’ formula. The question then would be whether the inheritance of the young entrepreneur is a furtherance of his or her father’s capitalist enterprises, or is a new beginning with new capital. The easy answer is that it is inevitably the former, even if the deceased father earned his money by pursuing mad enterprises.

The only way to rescue a purely Anti-Oedipal reading, it seems, is to view the benefits of the pleasure-dome – the ethereal song-production of the dulcimer maid, and then the visionary insight of the narrator who listens to her – as things of no earthly value. Certainly they can have no material value, for if they did the process would still be wedged securely in the MCM’ formula. But if the dulcimer
maid is to have no value, then we must assume that the benefits she provides to the narrator are of no consequence, either.

However, as this paper began, the true key to the Anti-Oedipal is the rejection of the ordinary, the inevitable, and especially the fore-ordained in favor of the anti-logical, the politically tone-deaf, and the downright dysfunctional. If Kubla’s decree in specific and “Kubla Khan” in general can have an Anti-Oedipal reading, then it must have something to do with the total rejection of any benefit of the pleasure-dome. The exclamation of the observers of the narrator, after all, begins with the repetition of the word “Beware.” The possibility exists that the word happened to be a suitable two-syllable iamb that Coleridge needed to fill in this particular line of the poem. However, considering his derogatory comment about poetic words “dearly purchased,” it seems just as plausible to argue that “beware” was indeed the very word he wished to use in describing the reaction of the narrator’s observers (Coleridge 1906, 10). In other words, the observers are really telling each other to watch the fellow with the flashing eyes and floating hair because of the potential dangers of his influence, just as the May 1968 protesters who did not immediately fall in lock-step with traditional French leftists were presumably telling each other to watch out for the easy answer of acceding to a socialist paradise.

Such a conclusion departs widely from most if not virtually all previous interpretations of “Kubla Khan,” because it assumes an ironic attitude toward the attainment of poetic vision. One problem with this interpretation is that there is little to suggest that Coleridge was given to cynical and ironic statements on the nature of artistic insight. Space is too brief to demonstrate this point in depth, but suffice to say that a survey of his entire poetic output simply does not reveal this flavor of cynicism. As for his prose works, a reading of *Biographia Literaria* in its more humorous and clever moments may suggest an occasional derisive attitude toward the sort of poetry that Coleridge finds a bit lacking, but nothing that mocks the reader’s earnest efforts to read poetry and actually gain something from the experience.

In fact, a more consistent Deleuzian/Guattarian interpretation would be that which is also described in their “Savages, Barbarians, Civilized Men” chapter:

[…] juridical and political relations are determined as dominant […] because surplus labor as a form of surplus value constitutes a flux that is qualitatively and temporally distinct from that of labor, and consequently must enter into a composite that is itself qualitative and implies noneconomic factors. Or the way the autochthonous relations of alliance and filiation are determined as dominant in the so-called primitive societies, where the economic forces and flows are inscribed on the full body of the earth and are attributed to it. In short, there is a code where a full body as an instance of antiproduction falls back on the economy that it appropriates. (247–248; original emphasis)
The key, then, is that the desire of the observers of the floating-haired narrator should be taken at face-value. Perhaps indeed the moment emerges when the observers indeed react to the floating-haired narrator with skepticism and perhaps even cynicism, but such a moment would be expected to occur much later in the period of late capitalism. And even this scenario emerges with extreme difficulty, because as the MCM formula predicts, capitalist production is quite resistant to spontaneous eruptions that might result in a pristine economic order. As Deleuze/Guattari also write,

The strength of capitalism indeed resides in the fact that its axiomatic is never saturated, that it is always capable of adding a new axiom to the previous ones. Capitalism defines a field of immanence and never ceased to fully occupy this field. (250)

To apply this concept to “Kubla Khan,” one view is that the floating-haired narrator does not lead to a new order that liberates the observer from the past, but rather merely creates yet another disjunctive synthesis. What does the observer do when confronted with the man with the flashing eyes and floating hair? “Weave a circle round him thrice” is the answer. The result is, like any article that is weaved, a new product that undoubtedly possesses added value, but still one that incorporates the clear traces of its components. With such a reading of the poem, we are once again presented with the possibility that economic production at Xanadu goes on as before and as standard Marxism would predict, regardless of whether the prime instigator Kubla Khan is mentally deranged or not.

Is it then possible to credit the observers with a sort of schizophrenic reaction to the narrator with the floating hair? Perhaps so, if we take the weaving as an activity that has no true productive value but is merely movement with no end-purpose. But this is also difficult to imagine, because even seemingly meaningless weaving movements have some larger purpose in almost any conceivable case, just as it would be difficult to envision the seemingly purposeless weaving motions of a bee in the open fields as not having some purpose that ultimately benefited the hive. Thus, to echo an earlier conclusion, a weaving around the floating man is simply not a ray of sunshine in the nether regions. Nor is it three.

Conclusion

The difficulty of arriving at an unambiguous Anti-Oedipal interpretation suggesting that “Kubla Khan” provides a schizophrenic view of the workings of the power-base may be due to my own limitations, but it may also be attributable to the ambiguous implications of the word “beware” as voiced by the narrator’s imagined audience. A persuasive schizophrenic interpretation, in other words, would posit a viewpoint in which the conclusions of the observers of the goings-on at
Xanadu would break free from that which they had been socialized to believe about their culture. Does the poem lead to the following choice of bipolar oppositions?

The paranoiac and the schizoid investments are like two opposite poles of unconscious libidinal investment, one of which subordinates desiring-production to the formation of sovereignty and to the gregarious aggregate that results from it, while the other brings about the inverse subordination, overthrows the established power, and subjects the gregarious aggregate to the molecular multiplicities of the productions of desire. (Deleuze and Guattari 376)

If Kubla is a sane and calculating capitalist who is merely building his pleasure-dome to keep his populace or at least a segment of it satisfied, then is the populace merely an ungrateful and indifferent lot who will simply have none of Kubla’s benevolence? Clearly not. Assuming that the dulcimer maid’s ethereal song is indeed made available by the venue of the pleasure-dome, then the reaction to the floating-haired narrator is a direct consequence rather than a bipolar opposition that ignores the workings of desire-production that it encounters.

Yet, Deleuze/Guattari also proffer an alternative that presumes a direct consequence to rejection of Kubla Khan’s gift of the pleasure-dome:

As for those we have named, we hold in the first place that art and science have a revolutionary potential, and nothing more, and that this potential appears all the more as one is less and less concerned with what art and science mean, from the standpoint of a signifier or signified that are necessarily reserved for the specialist; but that art and science cause increasingly decoded and deterritorialized flows to circulate in the socius, flows that are perceptible to everyone, which force the social axiomatic to grow ever more complicated, to become more saturated, to the point where the scientist and the artist may be determined to rejoin an objective revolutionary situation in reaction against authoritarian designs of a State that is incompetent and above all castrating by nature. (Deleuze and Guattari 379)

This conclusion from Anti-Oedipus presents a scenario in which a pleasure-dome – or a poem written about it – does not necessarily lead directly to an immediate revolution overthrowing the power that creates it, but nonetheless may lead to a cycle of events that ultimately undermines the State if its pleasure-domes are found to be wanting.

It is difficult to view the poem as one of individual liberation from social forces, even though certain of its admirers have undoubtedly derived this very conclusion. A more likely view is that “Kubla Khan” exhibits an early stage of Coleridge’s emerging conservatism which may or may not have begun when reports started reaching England that the heads were literally rolling in Jacobin France, but which nevertheless is clearly in evidence in his later prose writings. If we cannot conceive of a scenario in which the observers who “beware” the
narrator are enabled to break free of Kubla’s indirect influence, then perhaps the poem conceives a fairly conservative attitude toward the benevolence of the enlightened monarch. Even if the observers are invigorated by the promise of the future, they may nonetheless be assured that their king is still their king, and that the time is not yet ripe for the Nirvana in which Kubla Khans and pleasure-domes are no longer an economic necessity.

Notes

1. A search of the terms “Coleridge” and “Kubla Khan” on July 30, 2016 returned 8,850 results on Google Scholar. This does not translate to 8,850 refereed journal articles, but nonetheless indicates a large volume of scholarly interest.

2. As will be discussed later, an example is Coleridge’s reference to the servant girl who apparently became fluent in the ancient languages by passively overhearing her employer practice his language skills on occasion. (Coleridge 1906, 66–67).

3. The “Visitor from Porlock” has been well studied in its own right, as exemplified by the 65 hits returned on Google Scholar.

4. Space is entirely too limited to discuss the Oedipal complex further than a cursory mention of its continuing relevance as a metaphor. Deleuze and Guattari are more helpful in delineating the development of the Oedipus Complex for anyone wishing to pursue their argument further. For the present purposes, I will merely point the reader to The Interpretation of Dreams (2010) which is undoubtedly Freud’s most familiar text. On page 278, Freud states the following as a foundation of his work on neuroses: “What I have in mind is the legend of King Oedipus and Sophocles’ drama which bears his name.”

5. This and all subsequent quotations from the poem are taken from The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1912).

6. Marx states the formula in the first volume of Capital as follows: “[…] M-C-M, the transformation of money into commodities, and the change of commodities back again into money; or buying in order to sell. Money that circulates in the latter manner is thereby transformed into, becomes capital, and is already potential capital” (104).

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