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Ruth Ronen\*

## The Actuality of a World: What Ceases Not to Be Written

### Modalities and the Loss of World

In his seminar from 1973-1974,<sup>1</sup> Lacan mentions the work of the logician Jaakko Hintikka. This is a kind of hapax, but as with many philosophers Lacan mentions in passing,<sup>2</sup> what may seem like a semi-enigmatic reference, stores important insights. Lacan mentions Hintikka in the context of Aristotle's logic, which had regularly occupied Lacan in his teaching since 1961, and he alludes to Hintikka's name because someone has brought to his attention a book Hintikka had published a year earlier on Aristotelian modal logic. Modalities had already occupied Lacan in the seminar of the previous year (in Seminar XX on feminine sexuality). So why Hintikka, a well-known logician of the analytic tradition with an interest in epistemic reasoning for logic and with no interest in the psychoanalytic unconscious?

In this paper, Lacan's brief reference to Hintikka will be deciphered and expanded in order to address the question of how Aristotelian modalities and their use by Lacan can shed light on the question of *what the actuality of a world is, or what it takes to validate a possibility (either  $p$  or not  $p$ ) as an actual state of affairs.*

The question of what makes a world actual has an obvious political and philosophical import in our times, where whatever is considered "our world" appears to have segmented itself into multiple versions, equally weighing possibilities, with little to ground the privileging of the one over the other. Are corporations

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire XXI. Les non-dupes errant, 1973-1974*, unpublished, trans. C. Gallagher, <http://www.lacanireland.com/web/translations/seminars/>, accessed 8 December 2021. (The original transcript is available at: <http://gaogoa.free.fr/SeminaireS.htm>, accessed 8 December 2021.)

<sup>2</sup> This is different from philosophers such as Descartes, Hegel, or Pascal, whom Lacan discusses extensively and repeatedly. See Ruth Ronen, *Lacan with the Philosophers*, Toronto and London, Toronto University Press, 2018.

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benevolent organizations striving to advance the welfare of humanity or destructive profit-hunting machines leading to the collapse of the economy? Is science an infinite resource of progress and solutions to every human predicament, or is science a force-manipulating knowledge in order to camouflage its political commitments and interests? Is mass vaccination the only sure way that humanity can overcome viral pandemics, or is such vaccination part of a politics of surveillance, a current version of the panopticon? Doubt infiltrates our picture of world (and the versions thereof) and undermines our ability to discern among the possibilities. Thus, while a sense of actuality is obviously part of what being in a world entails, it seems particularly hard, nowadays, to substantiate one possibility as actually being the case.

“World” and “actuality” are also a part of modal thinking, and in the context of modal logic and possible worlds semantics, the *actuality* of a world converges with the question of the limits of possibility; actuality differentiates mere possibility from what can become an instantiated *fact*. Although we may agree that Socrates could have been Socrates without being a philosopher, the range of valid possibilities for these other alternatives requires further assessment.<sup>3</sup> Actuality not only touches the *difference* between an instantiated possibility (Socrates was a philosopher) and one that is not (Socrates was a Greek carpenter), but also the difference between possibility and impossibility. While people would agree that things might have differed from the way they actually are, those different possibilities can either be taken to constitute equally actualized worlds,<sup>4</sup> or alternative constructions only built on actually existing objects of our world, or “distant planets” remotely relevant to what we call “our world”.<sup>5</sup> Actuality as a modal notion assumes a *relation among possibilities* leading to our differentiating whatever is the case, i.e., the *being-such* of the world, from possibilities that do not materialize. This relation of the actual to the possible has been open to various understandings in the context of possible worlds semantics and logic, as modal logicians argue over whether all possibilities are

<sup>3</sup> A question answered, for instance, by Saul Kripke, by the moment of baptizing or naming as a symbolic moment determining the range of possibilities for a given entity in *Naming and Necessity*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1972, pp. 96 ff.

<sup>4</sup> A thesis propagated by David Lewis. See David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1986.

<sup>5</sup> Michael J. Loux, “Introduction”, in M. J. Loux (ed.), *The Possible and the Actual: Readings in the Metaphysics of Modality*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1979, p. 46 ff.

equally actual, or that everything possible *can become* actual, or actuality is dismissed as unanalyzable, an empty ascription adding neither a property nor any absolute ontological status to possible worlds.

While the modal polemic is not my concern here, it does indicate that whatever qualifies a possibility with the attribute of “actual” is not a trivial matter from the perspective of modal semantics and logic. The notion of a world suggests an Archimedean point, in relation to which possibilities of indeterminate status are differentiated: some are mere possibilities while others relate to the being-such of a world. Although “possible worlds” and the modal systems on which they rely carry metaphysical, logical, and epistemic consequences, one finds in any of their interpretations a measure or an organization relative to which possibilities are weighed. Whether “actual” is taken as a privileged notion (e.g., as in the Leibnizian idea of the best of all possible worlds) or as an indifferent assignment (every possible world can become actual), actuality is part of a system of possibilities, all or some of which (those that are not impossible) constitute a universe.

What determines the being-such of a world relative to other “possible worlds” also touches the core of current concerns as to whether “world” is still a valid organization of life forms. For us, inhabitants of whatever we name “our universe”, “there is no longer any world: no longer a mundus, a cosmos, a composed and complete order (from) within which one might find a place, a dwelling, and the elements of an orientation,” to quote Jean-Luc Nancy.<sup>6</sup> How does this absence of world relate to possible worlds terms? Can modal terms shed light on the meaning of this loss of world and on the sense of its actuality? This loss to which Nancy refers can be the loss of what orients contingent and possible states;<sup>7</sup> without a world as what provides composition and order, we are unequipped to determine the capacity of being of possible states. Without a world, possibilities, which cannot be assessed, are easily manipulated or hover atomistically with nothing to place them in relation to each other. It can be argued, in other words, that the absence of world is tantamount to equivalent possibilities lacking the option of actualization, that we have lost the sense in which a world

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. J. S. Librett, Minneapolis and London, The University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Possibility and contingency are usually distinguished by the former being opposed to impossibility and the latter to necessity. As we will see below, Aristotle shifts their relative standing, as does Lacan.

differentiates its fake states from its factual ones. The question of what makes a world actual, and of whether the actual can indeed be articulated in the absence of a world as support, is hence a question of pressing urgency (and actuality).

While modal notions introduce relativity into our understanding of how a world comes to be such and such (as there are multiple actualizable possibilities), the modal framework also supplies the grounds for differentiating the possible from the necessary or from the impossible. There are considerations, not merely logical, but also semantic and ontological, which determine how a given state of affairs qualifies for a modal category. Modal notions, however, do not address the question of what a world *is*, but of “world” as a modally nuanced organization. The modal structure of worlds is based on *a relationship* established between the actual and the possible, between the world’s being-such and its other possible and impossible states. In order to clarify this point of modal differentiation as determining the way a world is conceived, let us consider an example, distant from the world as described by Nancy, the world of ancient Greek tragedy:

Paedagogus: “Orestes is dead; that is the sum. [...] Hitherto the ill-fated Orestes had passed safely through every round, steadfast in his steadfast car; at last, slackening his left rein while the horse was running, unawares he struck the edge of the pillar; he broke the axle-box in twain; he was thrown over the chariot-rail; he was caught in the shapely reins; and, as he fell on the ground, his colts were scattered into the middle of the course.”<sup>8</sup>

These lines portraying Orestes’ death in vivid colors and dramatic detail to the devastated Electra and the rejoicing Clytemnestra describe a possible course of events that *did not take place*. Orestes is actually alive and planning to return to his city and avenge his father’s (Agamemnon’s) murder by his mother. Up until now, the question of whether Orestes is dead or alive had been undecidable for the characters acting in the scene. Now that the news regarding Orestes is presented, who could tell that the course of events – so described that it convinces us of it actually being the case – is false? That the news brought by Paedagogus is fake? There is nothing in the way this possible course of events is articulated as actual that marks its true status (as false).

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<sup>8</sup> Sophocles, *Electra*, lines 675-756, trans. R. C. Jebb, [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Tragedies\\_of\\_Sophocles\\_\(Jebb\\_1917\)/Electra](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Tragedies_of_Sophocles_(Jebb_1917)/Electra), accessed 8 December 2021.

In the Greek world of tragedy, however, the falsity of this course of events is destined to be exposed (as part of the logic of dramatic action), and a reversal of fortunes (*peripeteia*) will be enacted to reveal the actual state of Orestes. From among the possible routes of destiny, the actual will force its way through the course of events and will eventually be revealed. Even if the world is not fixed and can be given to change over time, its possibilities are determined by destiny, eternal truth, and human faults, so that what is actualized in the world of tragedy is rigidly determined, oriented by what has been predestined. Oedipus will have to act upon his sin, even if the extent of his fault or the possibility of cleansing it can be argued; Orestes' homecoming will be unavoidably marked by the bloodshed of revenge (as dictated by prophecy and the will of the gods), even if in some versions of the play the justification for killing his mother is not univocally endorsed. When Clytemnestra, eager to hear of Orestes' death, him being a direct threat to her life and well-being, is willing to believe the possible state of affairs described by the messenger, the course of events to be actualized in the world of the tragedy persists (in the replies of the chorus, for instance), positing an irreducible alternative to what the messenger tells the queen. What will come out as actually being the case, the being-such of the world of tragedy, is unchangeable and unavoidable due to there being a core of actuality in the world, in relation to which fake possibilities, such as the one portrayed by the messenger, are bound to be refuted.

What is it that has been lost when, as Nancy puts it, there is no longer a sense of a world? What can the status of the actual be when alternative worlds introduce themselves with ever-renewed appeal while establishing no relationship with one another? Have we lost the sense of the actual when losing the sense of the world? A world introduces a relation; it means *being-to* or *being-toward*; "it means rapport, relation, address, sending, donation, presentation *to* – if only of entities or existents *to* each other."<sup>9</sup> When there is no longer a sense of a world, then *p* and not *p* can no longer be modally differentiated. Even if one believes that there is only one possibility that is the actual one, the absence-of-world imposes a state of dispersed possibilities, of equal weight. Without a world we face an undifferentiated plurality of alternatives.

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<sup>9</sup> Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, p. 40.



The state of non-rapport, in the absence-of-world, is described by Nancy as a “philosophy of confines”: where there is no possession or mastery of a universe or cosmos, “we are at the confines of the multidirectional, plurilocal, reticulated, spacious space in which we take place [...] we touch our limits on all sides.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, this thing we call “world” is what determines a relation *among* possibilities, as the world enables us to weigh and differentiate what appear as equally valid states of affairs. Without a world, one is confined to *a* possibility, and what is actual appears to be merely possible; what is contingently true seems to be necessarily the case. Without a world, modal differences (outside their logical applicability) seem irrelevant, inapplicable distinctions.

It is at this juncture that the Aristotelian approach to the relation among modal notions and the psychoanalytic use that Lacan makes of this conceptual system of modalities come in, suggesting a way to re-think the notion of world and its “suchness”, that is, the relation of world to the actualization of possibilities.

### Lacan with Hintikka and Aristotelian Ambiguity

What Hintikka’s studies on Aristotle’s modal theory (the book from 1973 that Lacan mentions<sup>11</sup>) attest to is that the application of modalities to states of the world is not univalent. Hintikka focuses on the *ambiguity* of terms such as possibility, contingency, and necessity in Aristotle, revealed whenever these modal terms are applied to different cases or uses. Hintikka analyzes the depth of ambiguity in Aristotle’s logic by demonstrating ways by which the application of necessity or possibility diverts from their definition: hence, while possibility is defined as what is *not* necessary, in its application the possible can turn out to include necessity. It is in the way Hintikka pinpoints the source of ambiguity in Aristotle, *through the application of definitions to things*, that his importance for Lacan’s use of modalities can be clarified. In this section, Hintikka’s commentary on Aristotle will be presented in a way that already anticipates Lacan’s use of modalities. In this paper, I claim that Lacan suggests a different outlook on what differentiates modalities, using the difference between possibility and contingency in order to indicate the latter as a mode of breaching the confines

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Jaakko Hintikka, *Time and Necessity: Studies in Aristotle’s Theory of Modality*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973.

of mere possibility. This outlook will be considered in the last section of this paper, as a way of restituting a sense of actuality in the state of being “without a world”.

Hintikka starts off from the notion of *ambiguity itself as an ambiguous term* in Aristotle. Aristotle addresses ambiguity with the term *homonymy*, which indicates that two things sharing a name can part in their definitions. But when looking into cases of homonymy, Hintikka shows that it is sometimes used to further indicate a multiplicity of applications or uses rather than different definitions, and in such cases, homonymy shows broader applicability than homonymy in the proper sense. The ambiguity regarding what makes an ambiguity (a difference in terms, in definitions, and in application) reveals the gist of where the causes of ambiguity lie. Once a distinction is made and qualified (for instance, a continuum can be infinite in two ways, with respect to division or with respect to extremities), Aristotle will put the term in question to use disregarding the duality in application. What such instances, analyzed meticulously by Hintikka, reveal is that ambiguity is not resolved by definitions, but is further activated in the way the different terms are put to use. The ambiguity of terms such as “possibility”, “continuum”, or “substance” in Aristotle is not resolved by definitions, as definitions do not lead to a uniformity of usage: “We may note that in many of these cases Aristotle goes on using one and the same term although he has pointed out that it is used in different ways.”<sup>12</sup>

To anticipate Lacan, Aristotle can be paraphrased as saying that words are what founds the thing (*la chose*); but the thing is founded not on the words actually describing or defining its qualities, but rather on the condition that the words cease, and the thing is what *remains* of them. Lacan will accordingly define *possibility*, for instance, *as that which stops being written*.<sup>13</sup> The idea is that the thing we define as possible or necessary is the effect of a language operation (and is not given as such or so). Hence, in ceasing to say or write it, or in ceasing from not writing it, something is actualized, is made to be. To grasp the consequences of this Lacanian understanding of modalities, we first need to survey why, for Aristotle, it is impossible to exhaust the meaning of a term through its definitions.

<sup>12</sup> See Hintikka, *Time and Necessity*, pp. 25–26.

<sup>13</sup> Lacan, *Séminaire XXI*, lecture on 8 January 1974.

Specifically, according to Hintikka, possibility is a homonymous category in Aristotle: it is either opposed to necessity (something is possible when it is *not* necessary), or to impossibility (something is possible only if it is not impossible). “‘I use the terms ‘possibly’ and ‘the possible’ of that which is not necessary but, being assumed, results in nothing impossible’ [writes Aristotle in the *Prior Analytics*]. This is clearly the notion I have called contingency.”<sup>14</sup> While possibility is defined as what is not necessary, when put to use, possibility applies to all cases that are not impossible, including the necessary. Hence, the possible and the contingent converge and, as Hintikka goes on to argue, the necessary cannot be distinguished from the possible: “to say of the necessary that it is possible is to use the term ‘possible’ homonymously [...], which is what I called possibility proper.”<sup>15</sup>

Hintikka shows that possibility in Aristotle, when opposed to impossibility, has a broader range of application comprising also what is necessary,<sup>16</sup> whereas when possibility is equated with contingency it is opposed to necessity. This is an ambiguity related to a *duality of application, a duality revealed beyond the two definitions of possibility*. We will see below that the ambiguity of these terms (possibility, contingency, and necessity in Aristotle), that is, the fact that they cease to apply when put to use, is in fact what grants these terms the capacity to produce possible or necessary things. Lacan will use the Aristotelian modalities to indicate what *remains* when the words/definitions cease to apply.

To demonstrate possibility “in use,” Hintikka sketches the following diagrams to illustrate the ramifications of defining possibility in a dual manner, demonstrating thereby that possibility, when put to use, cannot be distinguished from other modalities.<sup>17</sup>

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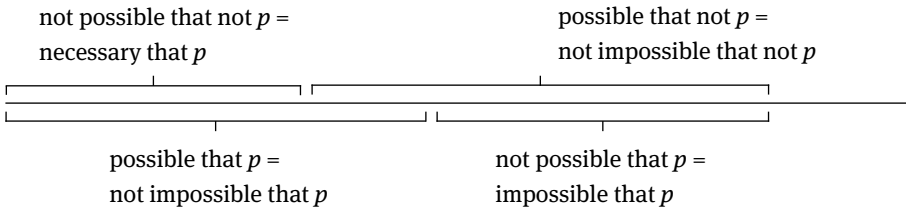
<sup>14</sup> Hintikka, *Time and Necessity*, p. 30.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

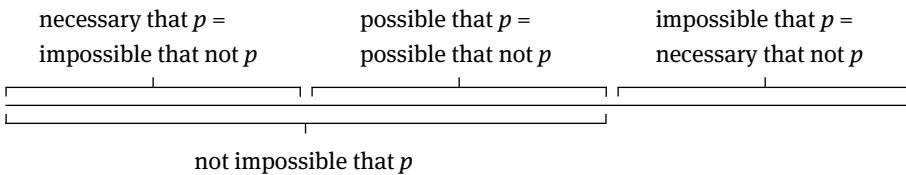
<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

*Diagram I*



*Diagram II*



Two implications drawn from these diagrams should be highlighted at this point: first, if possibility is defined as what is *not impossible*, it includes the necessary (Diagram I), which also puts the necessary in the position of being opposed to the impossible; as Lacan will remark: impossibility, that is, “what doesn’t stop not being written’[,] is a modal category, and it’s not the one you might have expected to be opposed to the necessary, which would have been the contingent.”<sup>18</sup> Lacan, as we will see, holds that the necessary is what necessitates an encounter with the impossible. Second, when possibility is defined as what is *not necessary* (Diagram II), the possible is equivalent to *contingency* (which is the category opposed to necessity). Hintikka summarizes these two points in the following way: “When one says that *p* is possible, one sometimes could also say that *p* is contingent and sometimes that *p* is necessary.”<sup>19</sup>

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We will shortly examine the writing operations ascribed by Lacan to each modal category and see what this resurgence of the contingent may mean. In preliminary terms, it can be understood in the following way: when something is declared necessary, for instance, “*p* always succeeds”, or “*p* never fails”, it does

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, Book XX: Encore*, trans. B. Fink, New York and London, W. W. Norton, 1998, p. 59.

<sup>19</sup> Hintikka, *Time and Necessity*, p. 29.

not exclude the option of “not-everything succeeds”, as long as failure is not impossible (“ $p$  is necessary” overlaps with “it is not impossible that  $p$ ”).<sup>20</sup> This is due to the conflation of necessity with possibility. In other words, “ $p$  fails” is not impossible even if “ $p$  never fails” applies. Contingency, in other words, is what “is not impossible” and remains in the domain of necessity.

What emerges by way of this demonstration (in the two diagrams) can also explain why Lacan would argue that it is not the true that is at stake for Aristotle (i.e., if it was,  $p$  and not  $p$  could not equally apply): Aristotle, Lacan claims, does not really care if all swans are truly white when “all swans are white” is asserted (some are obviously grey). When possibility is *opposed* to the necessary, it appears indifferent to whether  $p$  or not  $p$  apply. This case highlights the fact that possibility is just a saying (*un dit*), whose consequences are determined by what it is opposed to. Lacan will define *possibility as that which ceases to be written*; something else is needed: to discern from among mere possibilities what is not impossible.

What Aristotle wishes to guarantee is the link between swans and a predicate necessarily attributed thereto: “the important thing is that something should be articulated,” says Lacan,<sup>21</sup> but when articulated (for instance, when swans are universally assigned whiteness), things turn out to be other than what was expected, as swans are only *generally* white. Hence, in writing “all swans are white” as a necessity, this will “introduce the Real as such,”<sup>22</sup> viz: it will introduce what is not impossible, and is actually the case: that swans can be grey. In writing  $p$  as necessary, what remains unsaid is a real (rather than indifferent) thing that is not impossible. This short analysis of the color of swans reflects the way Lacan extracts male and female sexuality from the necessary application of the phallic function. It is in the putting to use of the universality of phallic jouissance that what is not impossible, and is other than phallic jouissance, emerges. It is in the relations between the saying, and what remains unaccounted for by the saying, that the Real is revealed.

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<sup>20</sup> Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, p. 58.

<sup>21</sup> Lacan, *Séminaire XXI*, lecture on 12 February 1974.

<sup>22</sup> The relation of writing to the Real is fundamental to Lacan’s understanding of the Real as what cannot be signified nor assimilated by signs, words, or letters. It is, however, through signifying operations that the remainder of these operations comes to be.

To summarize this section, it was shown that Hintikka's diagrams clarify the source of the indifference between  $p$  and not  $p$  (when possibility is opposed to necessity), and also the conditions for the emergence of  $a$  possibility (rather than any possibility) from whatever is said to be necessary, when necessity is opposed to impossibility.

### The Writing of Modal Possibilities

Lacan treats modal notions as *writing operations*, with each mode of writing establishing a different relation to what is being written or unwritten: *necessity* is a mode related to “what does not cease to be written”; *possibility* is a mode related to what “ceases to be written”, and *impossibility* is related to “what does not cease not to be written”. Lacan adds a fourth category: the *contingent*, as “what ceases not to be written”.<sup>23</sup> The operations of writing demonstrate that something remains from being written. From each mode of writing (or of ceasing to write or of not writing) another mode or *capacity of being* remains (e.g., what remains from not ceasing not to be written – from the necessary – is what cannot be written). In other words, the writing operations reveal what is real in modal differences. Lacan grants Aristotle a cardinal role also in this context. Being the first to use inscription for creating a logic, Aristotle's modal notions paved the access road to the Real, his logic being a “science of the Real.”<sup>24</sup>

A science of the Real produces knowledge of the Real, and this knowledge has the structure of a Borromean knot, linking two terms and another term that establishes their relationship (which is also the basic structure of logic, syllogism, combining three terms into an implication). Lacan's reference to Hintikka reinforces the Lacanian idea that Aristotle is arguing in a Borromean structure, in the sense that his logic exposes a third element that determines the distance between a term and its use, and which Hintikka describes at the same time as a source of ambiguity and a part of the modal structure. This third element is what remains unwritten, unarticulated – a hole. Lacan will claim that it is precisely

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, lecture on 19 February 1974.

<sup>24</sup> Lacan refers to Aristotle as *le frayeur*, i.e., the one who cleared the path for our understanding the kind of knowledge logic is committed to: knowledge of the Real, rather than of truth or of semantic understanding.

this hole, i.e., what appears not to be written, that constitutes a *real possibility*, the possibility of what ceases not being written.

“If a necessary event has been asserted to occur usually, clearly the speaker has denied an attribute to be universal which is universal and so has made a mistake.”<sup>25</sup> Putting the *modal notion of necessity* to use reveals that it is either incompatible with its general applicability (it is only generally the case that *p*, but it also happens that not *p*) or that the necessary is comprised within the domain of possibilities (as both possibility and necessity are not impossible) and its distinct modality is lost. In putting a proposition to use (a proposition being described by Lacan as the effacement of the sense of words), its true meaning is revealed in *the impossibility of the relationship*, that is, in the relationship between “swans are white” or “it never fails” and “it is not impossible that a swan is grey” or “it is not impossible that it fails”: it is this dimension of the knot that remains unarticulated and is the key to understanding the impact of modal distinctions.

Logic, Lacan claims, has been founded on sayings (*des dits*), and yet Aristotle manipulates them by “emptying this said of its meaning,” thus giving us an idea of the Real.<sup>26</sup> It is through writing that the paths of logic can be traced to reveal a different dimension to logical reasoning, different from the level of the said. This is precisely what Hintikka’s study of Aristotle reveals, despite Hintikka, so to speak, as Hintikka himself aims to formalize the ambiguities in order to resolve them. It is through the writing of logical structures that the depth of Aristotelian ambiguity is encountered, and this ambiguity is a sign of the force of logic in revealing through writing what cannot stop not being written.

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What Lacan has to say after his elusive and brief reference to Hintikka is that he has long been anticipated by Hintikka (“*le Hintikka en question [...] m’avait devancé depuis longtemps*”<sup>27</sup>) in the sense that Lacan had long been occupied with Aristotle and his logical tenets and here Hintikka has succeeded in actually articulating in a useful way these exact tenets, enabling us to draw the consequences from logic as a science of the Real. This Lacanian perspective on Hintik-

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle quoted in Hintikka, *Time and Necessity*, p. 28.

<sup>26</sup> Lacan, *Séminaire XXI*, lecture on 12 February 1974.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

ka's study as "particularly demonstrative," spotlights the presence of ambiguity in Aristotle as anticipating the Lacanian idea of "there is no sexual relationship" as a relationship between the necessary and the contingent. Lacan's formulas of sexualisation, representing the sexual difference between woman and man as the difference between two logical structures, are in this sense an instance of how to put Aristotelian logic to use. We have thus come all the way to clarifying how this peculiar triad (Aristotle, Hintikka, Lacan) can advance the question of what makes a state of affairs actually the case (a swan is either white or not-white, a state of affairs is either necessary or is impossible) despite the impossibility of articulating the relationship between them.

### From Necessity to the Contingency of the Phallic Function

In Seminar XX, Lacan uses the modal notions of necessity, contingency, and impossibility in the context of the sexual relationship between woman and man. The idea of formalizing sexual difference with the formulas of sexualisation has been much discussed in the literature. What concerns us here, however, is not sexual difference but the way in which Lacan uses modal notions in order to introduce the different positions of woman and man as partly overlapping (for both, phallic jouissance is necessary) and partly incompatible (although phallic jouissance is necessary, there is also another jouissance that is not impossible), despite the sexual relationship itself being impossible, that is, bound to fail (*ça rate*).<sup>28</sup>

As already mentioned, *necessity* appeared in Hintikka's diagrams as opposed to impossibility, which allowed unwritten possibilities to be implicated by what is declared necessary. Necessity, as that which does not stop being written, is linked (*conjugué*) to impossibility, to that which does not stop not being written by way of the contingent, by what stops not being written. The necessary in this context is the phallus, as what never fails (or should never fail), as the ubiquitous mark of a satisfying sexual relationship, and this necessity takes the form of universal sayings of the kind "there must be phallic jouissance", or "phallic jouissance never fails". This is obviously just a saying (as marked in the conditional form through which Lacan plays with the ambiguity of the verbs *faillir* and *falloir*: *c'est la jouissance qu'il ne faudrait pas*), but as a saying it affects what remains from what does not cease being written and is not impossible: another

<sup>28</sup> Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality*, p. 58.



jouissance. This other jouissance is what causes the sexual relationship to fail, as phallic jouissance is not whole. It may appear as if necessity covers the whole range of relevant possibilities, but it in fact hides the presence of the conditional, there being things that do not comply with this alleged necessity.

Necessity not only includes unarticulated possibilities; it also imposes whatever makes possibilities real, which is the fact that they are not impossible. To clarify how necessity operates: in a totally enigmatic world, “one tries to bring in this something which is supposed to be modelled on logic, and on which there is supposed to be grounded that in the species described as human *one is either man or woman*. This is very specially what experience rises against.”<sup>29</sup> Necessity modelled on logic rules that one is either man or woman. This is the necessity that is resisted in use/experience, as there are many for whom being man or woman is undecidable. Necessity is bound to come across a body that does not strictly resemble the body of a man or a woman, or to overhear a chat with a taxi driver who cannot tell if he/she is man or woman (an example used by Lacan). Whatever started as necessity, encounters the impossibility of writing the difference between woman and man. “There is no such thing as a sexual relationship” marks this substantial aspect of the phallic function: it does not acknowledge/write the difference even if it necessitates one.<sup>30</sup> Necessity is hence complemented by impossibility, by what resists the universal saying and does not stop not being written. Furthermore, what remains unacknowledged (that there is more than phallic jouissance) not only supports whatever is written as universally necessary, but also produces sexual difference as real.

“Were there another jouissance than phallic jouissance, it should not be/could never fail to be that one.”<sup>31</sup> In inscribing the phallic function as necessary, the other, not-impossible possibility, that supports it is disclosed as real. This not-impossible possibility is what cannot be known or articulated and yet makes love come into existence. The event of love, in other words, is an event brought about by what stops not being written, by the contingent. It is what remains (as the unknown connection) from the necessity of phallic jouissance and what is not impossible: the other jouissance because of which the sexual

<sup>29</sup> Lacan, *Séminaire XXI*, lecture on 19 February 1974.

<sup>30</sup> Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, p. 59.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

(phallic) relationship – fails. By interpreting contingency as what ceases not to be written, Lacan indicates that the contingent emerges as the real possibility unaccounted for by the universal saying. The contingent emerges from the impossible, but as what stops the impossible from not being written. In order for something of sexual difference to be written, the phallic function must allow the contingency of sexual difference to be registered: “the apparent necessity of the phallic function turns out to be mere contingency. It is as a mode of the contingent that the phallic function stops not being written. [...] The regime of the encounter is tantamount to contingency. It is only as contingency that, thanks to psychoanalysis, the phallus, has stopped not being written.”<sup>32</sup> The impossibility of the sexual relationship that complements the universal status of the phallic function is the condition for something to stop not being written, Lacan concludes in Seminar XX. Psychoanalysis is required for writing the contingent, and it is only in analysis that what is always the case comes across what cannot be written, thus assigning a place to what can here cease not to be written: an event of love. Contingency is what allows the universal to appear as conditioned on another *jouissance*, another *jouissance* that cannot be but such: “were there another *jouissance* than phallic *jouissance*, it should not be/ could never fail to be that one.”<sup>33</sup>

The real weight of modal terms for psychoanalysis lies here: since there is no sexual relationship (a relationship is impossible as long as what does not stop being written is phallic *jouissance*, a universal function that fails to account for sexual difference), we face a hole in knowledge. When this hole, this *troumatisme* (*trou* = hole) is exposed, the contingent can emerge, can take place. The contingent involves an invention of knowledge as it establishes a relation with a thing other than the one covered by the universal saying.<sup>34</sup> It is in this way that the universal saying is disclosed as being conditioned on something other than what it enumerates and this something is revealed as what does not stop being repeated.

The contingent emerges from impossibility, but how precisely does the contingent inscribe sexual difference? The contingent is invented knowledge by which the relation of necessity to the impossible comes to be written, or rather,

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>33</sup> See note 31.

<sup>34</sup> Lacan, *Séminaire XXI*, lecture on 9 April 1974.

ceases not to be written. Without the contingent, the scansion, the arrest, the ceasing (of not being written) cannot occur. To mention Nancy on this matter, the relationship between world and sense requires “that there should be non-sense or, rather, beyond-sense in order for there to be sense.”<sup>35</sup> Likewise, to have access to the world, one has to be on the threshold of access, in nonaccess, in impenetrability.

I cannot say all [women] because what is proper to the denumerable [there is no way to get to the end of them except by enumerating them one by one], is precisely that one never gets to the end of it. [...] The true saying is what comes to grief, is what comes to grief on this: that in an untenable *either-or* which would be that everything that is not man is woman, and inversely, what decides, what clears the way, is nothing other than this saying, this saying which is engulfed in what is involved in the hole by which there is lacking to the Real what could be inscribed about the sexual relationship.<sup>36</sup>

Women are not given to generalization, and are enumerated one by one. Enumerating one individual after another in order to form a group “does not involve any kind of identity of nature among them [...] it is like that that people imagine some universality or other.”<sup>37</sup> In forming a group by adding up individuals, we may be misled into thinking the differentiating identity of the group has been inscribed. While epistemic logic would start from saying: one is either man or woman, logic, as a science of the Real, would make it evident that universal sayings fail to capture this difference. The logic of the Real recognizes necessity as “conjugated” by impossibility, thereby partially rectifying this failure of differentiating woman from man. In putting the necessary to use, one faces the fact that while one is either woman or man, it is not impossible that one is neither precisely, or both. Thanks to psychoanalysis, sexual difference can emerge as contingent: it emerges from the impossibility of grouping women under one universal, and from the failure of the phallic function to account for this or that case. This failure leaves as a remainder something that diverges from phallic

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<sup>35</sup> Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, p. 60.

<sup>36</sup> “Le dire vrai c’est ce qui achoppe, achoppe sur ceci : que pour, dans un *ou-ou* intenable qui serait que tout ce qui n’est pas homme est femme et inversement, e qui décide, ce qui fraye n’est rien d’autre que ce dire [...] qui pourrait s’inscrire du rapport sexuel.” Lacan, *Séminaire XXI*, lecture on 19 February 1974.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

jouissance and is yet not impossible. The contingent constitutes the grounds for an actual love relation to take place; it is the basis on which the actuality of the relationship comes to be as an actuality based on difference.

Hence Lacan's logic of sexualization inscribes difference in terms of what is impossible to be known (i.e., the relationship between man and woman), and from this impossibility there emerges two sexual positions: the one exhausted by phallic jouissance *and* another jouissance, and they emerge as actual possibilities.

### **The Actuality of a World: Being-Such as What Ceases Not to Be Written**

These thoughts around the ternary encounter of Lacan with Aristotle and Hintikka suggest an *understanding of actuality in terms of the advent of contingency*, as what emerges from the proximity between the necessary and the impossible (a proximity revealed through the Aristotelian ambiguity in the use of modal terms). For the *contingent* to take place, the hole in universal knowledge should be recognized. Coming against the interference of what eludes articulation (i.e., what does not cease from not being written) in the domain of necessity, reveals what is actually the case. The contingent is what comes to take place in response to the inherent limitation of the universal: it does not know of the actuality of being-such. Hence, the actual enjoyment in a love event emerges from "there is no sexual relationship," as a saying that already acknowledges the failure of universal love. Unlike the saying: "sexual love always succeeds," the Lacanian universal already recognizes what is impossible in this love, and is encountered whenever a sexual relationship is experienced.

When phallic jouissance alone is acknowledged, its effect is that of confinement to just this universal possibility, which camouflages or disables all other possibilities. While the universality of phallic jouissance fails to acknowledge the difference between woman and man, or between their modes of sexual enjoyment, when the sexual relationship is *conjugated* with impossibility, we grasp something of actual love, of the contingent mode of being involved in love. Alternative to this arrival of the contingent from the impossible, when all possibilities of enjoyment are taken on a par, jouissance fails to be written (hence the possible is what ceases to be written, that is, it is indifferent difference).

This Lacanian understanding of the relations between the modal notions after Aristotle and Hintikka illuminate the idea that the absence of world can be understood as the absence of a sense of the actual. The difficulty in discerning the actual from the merely possible or fake does not lie in the failure of defining modal categories, but in these categories losing their grasp on the Real. What hinders our path to actuality is one's bewitchment with universal sayings that commensurate (or eradicate) all possibilities and fail to acknowledge the impossibility of knowing and the actuality of difference.

We will now examine the implications that can be drawn from the Lacanian modalities in order to arrive at a relevant understanding of the problem of actualization in our contemporary world (as opposed to the Greek one). In Sophocles' play (as in the other dramatic versions of the story of the house of Atreus), the apparition of Orestes as definitely and actually alive is preceded by endless doubts, misgivings, and regrets on the part of the characters regarding the possible scenarios that can be actualized. These eventually lead to the disclosure of the actual situation: Orestes is alive and is bound to avenge the murder of his father. While destiny is deterministic, and the individual's leeway for influencing the decree of the gods is limited, the relation of human life to its destiny remains an ongoing riddle. That is, despite the force of destiny, there is a space of undecidability in which individual action comes to take place. In fact, the individual would not be able to act if the universal edict did not both impose its dictates and yet leave as unarticulated what will come to be written – the contingent – by individual action. The necessity of destiny does not subsume all possibilities, and yet, for the contingent to emerge, an enactment of what is not a mere possibility is required.

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While in Greek tragedy the contingent, the course of events actually taken, must acknowledge what cannot be definitely known in the face of universal truths, a contemporary example of which binds human life to the global destiny, divulges a different modal structure – I refer here to the case of *global warming* as a case in point. In the face of a warming planet whose causes (the burning of fossil fuels) and consequences for humanity (environmental destruction) are known, a recent history of the politics of science unfolds the case of how the productive force of necessity as portrayed by scientists can be reduced by the powerful in-

strument of doubt.<sup>38</sup> The story is that global warming was already anticipated by oil companies back in the early 1980s, and the implicated companies reacted by spreading *doubt* regarding the anticipated scenario. The destructive outcome of global warming has been put on a par with other possible outlines (that the human genius will find solutions to climate change in due time, that global warming could be due to cosmic cycles that human beings cannot influence, etc.). At the same time, the unshaken belief in humanity's progress was opposed to the possible compromising of this progress in case fossil fuels are no longer burnt. The insertion of doubt into the equation had an inevitable effect. The inevitable scenario of global warming was reduced to a mere possibility (which can best be met by inaction in the direction of reducing emissions). Doubt has also affected the balance between human progress and the perilous changes in its course humanity can take, thus privileging the former. In other words, all modal options apart from the dependence of human progress and sustenance on fossil fuels were reduced to mere possibilities, thus devaluing or even erasing the possible weighing of alternatives.

A "Greek" attitude toward the universal belief that "humanity cannot fail" or that "humanity always progresses" would imply a different modal understanding. This universal belief, as much as its dictates are powerful, implies a hole in knowledge (progress is just the known part of human history and it is not impossible that the idea of progress is ill-conceived) regarding what remains unacknowledged.

But when the proximity of necessity to impossibility (that is, what the necessary allows as not impossible alternative actions) is camouflaged, the contingent fails to arrive and no action is seriously undertaken. The sense of what is real is lost as the individual is confined to only one possibility presented as the exclusive/necessary one. While in tragedy the individual had to fight through possibilities in order to decide what his or her actualized action with regard to the dictates of destiny and the gods will be, the doubt spread in the present case prevents the contingent from taking place. With no serious alternatives to what is taken to be

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<sup>38</sup> See Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Climate Change*, London, Bloomsbury, 2011; Benjamin Franta, "Early Oil Industry Disinformation on Global Warming", *Environmental Politics*, 30 (4/2021), pp. 663–668.

the necessary state of affairs, all other possibilities acquire equal weight or are completely suppressed. In such a case, actuality eludes one's grasp.

This short example can illustrate the consequences of reconsidering modal notions from a Lacanian perspective, as suggested in this paper. It allows us to conclude that whenever a state of the world is presented as necessary, so that any scansion, arrest, or ceasing (either by *weighing* the alternatives, or by *conditioning* the necessary as not being the whole case) is avoided, there is a failure of actualization. When what are declared necessary truths constantly replace each other, and when possibilities introduce themselves with equal appeal and conviction, it is the modality of the contingent – i.e., the advent of a real possibility (as a limit on what appears as necessary) – that can restore our sense of the actuality of a world.

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