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Perverse Disavowal and the Rhetoric of the End

A man says to his wife: “If one of us dies, I’ll move to Paris.”

This is the joke that Freud uses in his text “Thoughts for the Times of War and Death” (first published in 1915) to illustrate his argument that we (and particularly our unconscious) do not believe in our own death, that it is impossible to imagine our own death, for even when we do imagine it, we are still there, present as spectators.¹ Of course we know that death exists, and also “experience” it with others, with the pain and irreversibility that come when people close to us die. But this knowledge of death, and the capacity to talk rationally about death as natural, undeniable, and unavoidable, changes nothing of the fact that “in reality, however, [...] we behave as if it were otherwise.”² Those familiar with psychoanalysis will recognize in this formulation the template of the notion of the disavowal (*Verleugnung*), as formulated most explicitly by Octave Mannoni: “I know well, but all the same (I still behave as if ...).”³ Freud already uses the term disavowal in this paper, although one usually quotes his latter paper “On Fetishism” as the key reference in this regard. He also makes a very interesting observation regarding one of the forms that the disavowal of death can take, pointing out our habit of laying stress on the fortuitous, accidental causation of the death – “accident, disease, infection, advanced age; in this way we betray an effort to reduce death from a necessity to a chance event.”⁴ In other words, by

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² Sigmund Freud, “Thoughts for the Times of War and Death”, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV*, J. Strachey and A. Freud (eds.), London, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1957, p. 289.

³ Octave Mannoni, “I Know Well, but All the Same...”, in M. A. Rothenberg et al. (eds.), *Perversion and the Social Relation (SIC 4)*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2003.

⁴ Freud, “Thoughts for the Times of War and Death”, p. 290.

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naming the immediate cause of death, we obfuscate death as necessity, even if we admit that it happens to everyone. We say something like: “Everybody dies, but accidentally.” Our unconscious, states Freud, “does not believe in its own death; it behaves as if it were immortal [...] there is nothing instinctual [drive-related, *Triebhaftes*] in us which responds to a belief in death.”⁵ The fear of death (*die Todesangst*) is in this sense only secondary, although it dominates us more often than we know, and is usually the outcome of a sense of guilt.⁶ *Todesangst* is thus conceived by Freud as already part of (subsequent) *psychology*; it is conceived as a psychological consequence, rather than as something original.

Freud names the war as one of the occasions which sweep away this mode of thinking about death, and no longer allow for the death to be disavowed. But he uses a most interesting wording to express this idea: “we are *forced to believe* in death,” he writes. As if the impossibility to just “take it in” would remain, and with it the structure of the disavowal and of belief. It is not that we now know that death is real, we “believe” it since we are forced to do so.

There is, however, a certain paradox or ambiguity at work in Freud’s considerations. Namely and to put it very simply: if the non-belief in our own death is a fundamental fact (also and primarily in the unconscious), if we profoundly do not believe in (our) death, why would we need to disavow it? The situation is not that deep down that we know that we will die, we just will not accept it; it is rather that “deep down” we are sure we will not die, we just superficially and “rationally” accept it. In other words, although it resonates strongly with the structure of the disavowal and its fundamental formula (“I know well, but nevertheless”), the non-belief in death also seems to lack something in order to actually qualify as disavowal. What it lacks is the traumatism, and its relationship to our experience. However, things are not as straight forward in this respect as it might seem. There is an interesting discussion going on in psychoanalysis concerning the question of a possible “traumatism outside experience”, which “drives”, for example, the compulsive repetition of unpleasant, painful experiences that Freud discusses in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”.⁷ This suggests that even though something is not, and cannot be, a direct object of experience,

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⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

⁷ Cf. Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, Chapter 7.5.

it can nevertheless qualify as traumatic. The question of what can induce something like an “experience of death,” even if it does not involve (our) death, is very important indeed.

Jacques Lacan has a most interesting take of this when he asks: What exactly is it that makes our relationship to death, or the relationship between life and death, dramatic? Why are we not simply indifferent to (our) death as something situated beyond our experience properly speaking? Philosophy has answered by emphasizing our awareness of death, our being conscious of the fact that we will die, our capacity to think it, to talk about it, to anticipate it (rationally). Lacan has a somewhat different answer. He suggests that our relationship to death is not simply or only “virtual” (symbolic, rational) in the sense of being deprived of the real of its experience, but is present on the level of experience thorough the drive. This stance departs from Freud’s view that there is nothing drive-related in us which would correspond to a belief in death. In his conceptualization of the drive (as essentially a dead-drive), Lacan posits that death is present at the level of the drive not as something that the drive aims at, but through the surplus enjoyment that keeps disturbing our relationship to our own body. It is the fact that we are situated within an (unsought) portion of enjoyment (*jouissance*) that makes different attitudes toward death possible to begin with. Death as such, in itself, does not yet involve the possibility of a “dramatic” relationship to itself:

The life-and-death dialogue [...] only assumes a dramatic character from the moment *jouissance* intervenes in the balance between life and death. The vital point, the point of emergence of something that all of us here more or less believe we form part of, namely speaking being, is this disturbed relation to our bodies that is called *jouissance*.⁸

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Lacan’s point here could be summed up as follows: the relationship between life and death is indeed trivial, or would indeed be trivial, if it were not necessarily interrupted, complicated from within. Something third comes between life and death and complicates their (indifferent) relationship for us, something implicates one in another, something that cannot simply be identified with our con-

⁸ Jacques Lacan, ... or Worse. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XIX*, transl. A. R. Price, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2018, pp. 31–32.

sciousness. And something similar is at stake in the relationship between our being awake and sleeping:

Sleep is designed to suspend the ambiguousness that there is in the body's relation to itself, namely the deriving of jouissance therefrom. [...] When one sleeps, it's a matter of making the body coil up. It rolls itself into a ball. To sleep is not to be disturbed. After all, jouissance is disturbing. Naturally, the body gets disturbed, but so long as it's asleep, it can hope not to be disturbed. This is why, from then on, all the rest vanishes. Nor is it a question any more of semblance nor of truth – because all of this holds together, it's the same thing – nor of surplus jouissance. Except, there you have it. What Freud says is that, during this time the signifier is still on the go.⁹

And here, with this last remark, we of course raise the specifically Freudian question of dreams and of that surplus-enjoyment, or truth, or semblance, that the working of the signifier can smuggle into a dream, and which eventually *disturbs* us – even when we are fast asleep, rolled up into a ball – waking us from within the dream. The edge at play here is the same “rub” upon which Hamlet's famous monolog dwells: “*For in that sleep of death what dreams may come...*”

We will not pursue it any further here, but will instead use this cue to point out the ambiguity of the trope of “waking up” – also in our contemporary social context and discussions. Namely, and as Lacan also perspicuously suggested, it often happens with dreams that *we wake up to so as to go on dreaming*. This is particularly true for nightmares, and generally true for the dreams in which a real appears that is more real, more traumatic and shattering than our everyday reality. So, in response we wake up, and proclaim to be awake, in order to be able to continue to dream, that is, to continue to exist untouched, unscattered by the real that has just appeared. The real nightmare is thus precisely one from which we cannot wake up.¹⁰

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With this in mind, we could clearly see how “waking up” can function (and does indeed function) in a strange complicity with disavowal, the concept of

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

¹⁰ Peter Klepec has recently written about the notion of “nightmare” in our social context. See his paper “Covid-19, das Unheimliche in nočna mora”, in *Problemi*, 57 (9-10/2020), pp. 111–139.

which we will return to in a moment. Just think of the contemporary crises that befall us, one after another – which now already account for something like a “serial crisis” – from climate change, to financial crisis, to Covid pandemic, to the Ukraine war, to the global energy crisis, as well as more and more perceptible tectonic shifts that indicate the collapse of capitalism as we used to know it, and its possible transformation into something else (some speak of “neo-feudalism”), etc. Are we not dealing in all these cases, and in spite of their obvious differences, with a situation where we wake up so as to be able to continue to dream? Each time we proclaim that this is now a complete “game changer”, that we have woken up from the “end of history” and its lull, we at the same time go on mostly as before, as if nothing really happened, or else we (want to) return to some anterior state. There are certainly many declarations and a lot of commotion surrounding this “waking up”, but in the midst of all this commotion we seem to just go on dreaming.

In previous decades there was a lot of talk about the “need to change,” but now it seems that the reality has overtaken us: things are changing, quite dramatically. So no wonder that the talk about the “need to change” has passed from critical voices to the mainstream discourse, where it basically means adapting to the new reality of something that looks gloomier every day. It means: we need to change our way of being in order to accommodate these tectonic shifts, this real that has hit us as if accidentally. And can we not hear in this an echo of Freud’s observation that one way of disavowing something is to emphasize its fortuitous, accidental character? (In our case, disavowing the deeply systemic causes of different crises, springing necessarily from the existing global system?) It also seems that, over the past 50 years, the less we allowed our politics to be “radical”, that is, to address the root cause of our issues, the more it is the external reality (including nature) that has become “radicalized”, and is now closing in on us with revenge.

To resume: a change, a major tectonic change, is already happening, whether we like it or not. It did not wait for us to decide whether we now *really* wanted to put an end to what has been going on, and say “That’s it! And now for something completely different.” The world as we knew it is really falling apart, changing dramatically, all around us and right in front of our eyes. In most cases it is certainly not what we had in mind when we were critically demanding a

change, but the change *is real*, and ongoing. It is penetrating and shaking up all spheres of our life.

We sense this, we know this, yet, to some extent at least, we seem to be caught up in a bizarrely cheerful mood of “the show must go on” (greatly captured in Adam McKay’s film *Don’t Look Up*), which the word *cringe* would seem to describe very well and which could be summed up as follows: “The world is ending, but hey, it’s not the end of the world!”

And this cheerful attitude is mostly *not* due to the fact that some other organization of the social is now possible, and we are actively thinking of it, celebrating it, engaging with it, but is rather related to a disavowal of this Change that is taking place. It has to do with depriving the end/rupture of its reality, rather than with looking beyond it. Put differently: we do not strive to inhabit and steer the Change, but mostly lose our breath trying to keep up with it. In this situation, a strange and unexpected complicity arises between the functioning of the economic and political “elites” and the conspiracy theorists, which we will return to in a moment.

To be sure, there is also a lot of catastrophism around, fascination with the apocalypse, with various disasters and prophecies of doom, with the spectacle of the End. Yet far from being the opposite of disavowal, this vivid catastrophism constitutes an important and integral part of it. The end of the world thus appears as a kind of general spectacular environment, a coulisse of the stage on which we go on with our business as usual. Images of apocalypse are precisely the fantasmatic screen obfuscating (“protecting” us from) the real apocalypse, which has already started creeping up on us, and is not looming, waiting for us somewhere in the future.

Let us therefore look a bit more closely at the concept of the disavowal, also known as “fetishist disavowal”. Disavowal is not the same as denial, it brings about the split between *knowledge* and *belief*: “I know very well that there is no X, but I keep believing that X” – I keep behaving and acting as if I did not know what I know and what I am able to state as my knowledge (in this sense there is no repression, no amnesia at work here). I know, and I am able to acknowledge some fact, yet the latter seems to be deprived of its reality and meaning. It is not that I unconsciously keep believing what I know to be otherwise; I do not

need to do this, for the fetish believes it in my stead. As already pointed out by Mannoni: Whereas the phrase “I know well, but all the same” is the trademark or signature of disavowal, a fetishist will never *say* “but all the same” since his “but all the same” is his fetish.¹¹ The belief is outsourced to the fetish, while we know perfectly well how things stand and are able to talk about it rationally.

To illustrate how fetish works in disavowal, Slavoj Žižek¹² recounts a story about a man whose wife was diagnosed with acute breast cancer and who died three months later; the husband survived her death unscathed, being able to talk coolly about his traumatic last moments with her – how? Was he a cold, distant, and unfeeling monster? Soon, his friends noticed that, while talking about his deceased wife, he always held a hamster in his hands, her pet object and now his fetish, the embodied disavowal of her death. When, a couple of months later, the hamster died, the man broke down and had to be hospitalized for a long period.

It could be argued that a further twist in this structure appears in our contemporary functioning and in contemporary forms of disavowal.¹³ We could describe it as a configuration in which *knowledge* about some traumatic reality gets strangely *redoubled*, and starts playing itself the role of the object-fetish that protects us against this reality. From the hamster example Žižek concludes:

So, when we are bombarded by claims that in our post-ideological cynical era nobody believes in the proclaimed ideals, when we encounter a person who claims he has been cured of any beliefs, accepting social reality the way it really is, one should always counter such claims with the question: OK, but where is your hamster – the fetish which enables you to (pretend to) accept reality “the way it is”?¹⁴

And the point we are arguing here would be that, in an intriguing short circuit, it is the knowledge itself (about how things really stand) that is our hamster, enabling us to (supposedly) accept the reality that this knowledge refers to. Just think of how important it is today to declare that we are not naïve, not deceived or duped by anything, how important it is to know “how things really stand,” to

¹¹ Mannoni, “I Know Well, but All the Same...”, p. 70.

¹² Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, London and New York, Verso, 2008, p. 299.

¹³ I first introduced this argument in my paper “‘You’d have to be stupid not to see that’”, *Parallax*, 22 (4/2016), pp. 422–423.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

know what is “behind,” to know that the Other is unreliable and full of tricks, and above all to *let others know that we know*. We are much more concerned with the possibility of deception than with the traumatic dimension of the real. Even the craziest and weirdest conspiracy narratives are primarily anchored in this will to not be deceived. For example, the belief that the earth is flat is not really a quarrel about *the shape* of the earth, but an attempt to point out the massive *deception* that has been systematically going on for hundreds of years. It is not simply that flat earthers refuse science and scientific proofs, they refuse to be deceived, taken in by the “manipulation” of science...

The permutation thus also appears at the level of “but nevertheless”, which presupposes an opposition, a contradiction. The structure of fetishist disavowal (“I know very well, *but I nevertheless* continue to believe the opposite.”) mutates into “I know very well, *and this is why* I can go on ignoring it.” Or: I see it, I acknowledge it, and this is why I can now forget about it.

In a kind of folding over itself, knowledge takes the structural place of the fetish that helps us ignore some traumatic reality. All that is important is that we “know everything about it,” that we are “nobody’s fools,” and that we let others know that we know it. Letting others know, proclaiming, *flagging* our knowledge is a crucial element. (And the apocalyptic coulisse, the rhetoric of the end, is part of that.)

Let us take a nice example of this structure from the movie *Don't Look Up*. There are many ingenious formulations in the film that encapsulate this form of disavowal, for instance the following newspaper headline: *Deadly comet about to hit Earth. Will there be a Super Bowl?* This formulation does in fact render the gist of the configuration much better than a direct denial would (if the headline had read: *There is no deadly comet, it's all a lie!*). It is almost as if the first part of the sentence – the declared “knowledge” of the approaching deadly comet – needed to be there in order for us to then peacefully talk about the Super Bowl. All we want is to talk about the Super Bowl, and the acknowledgment of the deadly comet is there just a kind of courtesy requirement, like greeting others and asking them how they are, before starting a real conversation. But precisely as such, as purely formal, this first part is essential to the functioning of disavowal (it could not be simply left out); its declaration is precisely what makes the “business as usual” attitude of discussing the Super Bowl possible.

There is yet another important thing that McKay's film makes very palpable, namely that – contrary to what we like to think – disavowal does not simply take place on the side of conspiracy theorists and “blind masses,” but perhaps primarily on the side of the “elites,” of the (supposedly) “rational” mainstream, of the carriers of economic power. Conspiracy theories are rather a symptom or, I would argue, an embodiment of the grotesque unconscious of the elites. And the “elites” need conspiracy theorists to point their finger at them, to contrast them with their own supposed rationality, and make us blind to their own madness. Which is why, albeit usually abhorring each other, the “elites” and the conspiracy theorists often function in a strange complicity.

Conspiracy theories are right in one point: the elites like it when there is a threat in the air, and they like to cash in on that threat, both ideologically and economically (for instance by making huge amounts of money with strategies for preventing it, for attending to it). In order to cash in on the threat, to go about making money based on that threat, they must not fully and genuinely believe in its reality and danger, even if they keep talking about it. In other words, they need to disavow it, that is, to continue to behave – in their everyday business lives – as if the danger is not “really real,” or not really that big. For conspiracy theorists, this constitutes yet another “objective” *proof* that the danger does not really exist, and is merely being staged by the elites in order to subdue us and make money. The reasoning goes as follows: since the elites clearly do not really believe in the danger, and continue with their business, there is no danger. “The elites are not crazy,” goes the argument, *they know exactly what they are doing*, the whole thing is a masterplan. And it is this very presupposition that actually makes it possible for the elites to continue to de-realize the danger, (the catastrophe which they themselves are often causing). It is herein that resides the key mistake of conspiracy reaction, a mistake to which we would have to respond something like: *No, it's worse! The elites really are so crazy (to not take the danger seriously)! And this is precisely why we should be truly scared! No, they do not know what they are doing, they have no masterplan beyond keeping themselves in business.* Instead, the conspiracy theorists tend to declare the unconscious of the “elites”, their pathological madness posing as “rationality” (“the danger is manageable by our usual means”), to be the objective reality. In this precise sense, the conspiracy theorists are basically staging, embodying, the very unconscious of the elites, that is, the very madness on which their “rationality” leans in what is a classic case of disavowal. No wonder that the

“elites” tend to regard conspiracy theories with horror: it is certainly distressing to see your own unconscious “return from the real,” to see it exist out there. But it can also come in handy to be able to point the finger at these crazy Others from which your rationality is allegedly saving the world.

A very popular reference of conspiracy theorists is the film *The Truman Show*, in which the audience of a gigantic reality show is entertained by watching the hero of the show conducting his life *without knowing* that he is part of a reality show. Everything, every little piece of reality is staged for him, including the firmament, the sky. Everyone is there in order to create a fictitious world for this one person, to convince him of its reality, and to keep him there. What is happening today is in fact something very different. First, the elites are creating a fictitious world primarily *for themselves*, not for us; they are staging it so as to be able to continue to believe that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with it, and that, with some ingenuity and some “adjustments,” it can simply go on toward an even brighter future. However, although they are staging this for themselves, their crazy beliefs have an effect on us as well: while watching them continue with their business as usual, we also start to believe that nothing is fundamentally wrong, and that we just need to make some adjustment and amends. *The Truman Show* today is nothing but the so-called real world of capital, of stock markets, of financial markets, transactions, and balloons, which the elites are putting up – often with our help – mainly for themselves. Their benefit is double, financial or material, as well as psychological, namely the psychological gain provided by the fetishist disavowal of the real crisis. Whereas the real catastrophic effects take their toll mostly on the opposite end of the social ladder, and often on the opposite end of the world.

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Conceptually, the notion of disavowal may also help us explain what looks like *crazy heroism*, accompanying the crazy cheerfulness that we mentioned earlier: namely, it seems that we would – quite literally – rather die than let ourselves be scared to death by what is coming if we let the change and the events take their “natural course”; this is particularly striking in respect of climate change. *We are more afraid of being scared to death than of actually dying*. This brings us to the next and final point of our discussion, which could be called “the difference between two survivals”.

There is a strange ambiguity and paradox today surrounding the notion and discussion of survival. “The logic of sheer survival” has a pretty bad reputation in contemporary, but not only contemporary, emancipatory philosophy: it basically means that we merely cling on to our lives, in the absence of any idea or truth. The ideological domination of *primum vivere* is denounced as oppressive, and it is sometimes contrasted with some other cultures or civilizations – “less decadent” and more “vital” ones – where this is not the case.¹⁵ We also often hear that contemporary (bio)politics reduces us to “bare life”, or that it enslaves us by making us hostages to mere survival. However, it suffices to just look around and think about what is mostly going on, and it becomes far less certain that we really care that much about our survival. It is almost the opposite that seems to be the case. In other words, it is as if two quite different notions or modalities of survival were being confused in these debates and social diagnostics.

So perhaps we should return to Hegel on this point, and articulate the difference between two modalities of survival and fear, as follow from the famous section on the master – the slave (or “lord and bondsman”) dialectics in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Briefly stated: in the life-and-death struggle between the two self-consciousnesses, and in mortal fear, the slave chooses life, yet this does not mean that he thus forever condemns himself to living in the modality of sheer survival, without any idea or truth. The master is prepared to go all the way and die, yet this also does not mean that he is henceforth immune to the logic and straitjacket of “survival mode”. Hegel’s point is rather that the *actual freedom* (also with respect to the demands of sheer survival) cannot be chosen directly, and in this sense the master’s choice is no more “correct” than the slave’s. And of course this is also not simply about the fact that we first have to choose life, if we want to make something of it; it is about the fact that we first need to experience the *trembling of pure negativity*, the mortal dread.

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[Servitude] does in fact contain within itself this truth of pure negativity and being-for-itself, for it has experienced this in its own essential nature. For this consciousness has been fearful, not of this or that particular thing, or just at odd moments, but its whole being has been seized with dread; for it has experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord. In that experience it has been quite unmanned,

¹⁵ This self-perception and *self-accusing* of the West as decadent is itself an interesting phenomenon.

has trembled in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations.¹⁶

If the choice of life is not a *forced choice* (forced because of mortal fear, as in the case of the “slave”), but appears natural and immediate, then we have no means of accessing it and repeating the choice, since there is nothing to repeat here, we can only cling on to our lives, without even knowing why we bother. In other words, the problem is not a slave who, in mortal terror, has bent before a master (or rather before death as the “absolute master”) – for him there is still a possible emancipatory future, even freedom. The problem is with the idea of “neutral persons” who are neither masters nor slaves, but who “freely” *create* their life and personality, change roles, etc., whose whole being has never been seized with dread, by the experience of sheer negativity. Paradoxically, what condemns us to the logic of survival without any idea or truth (or emancipatory politics) is not the experience of mortal fear, but rather the *absence of this experience*, of the (also symbolic experience) *cut* it represents, cut into the immediacy of our lives, and of the *subjectivation* – in one way or another – of this cut, of this negativity. There is thus an important difference between the mortal fear (Hegel’s *erzittern* in the face of pure negativity), in response to which we *choose* to survive, and survival as an immediate fact (that comes with life), as the conservation and maintenance of life, known as *primum vivere*.

To say, as we suggested earlier, that today it mostly seems that we would rather die than allow ourselves to be scared to death, points in the direction of this second alternative, and appears as its symptom. We fear dread more than death. Is this – and to return to the beginning of our discussion – because dread presents something like a lived experience of death, whereas “death” itself remains too abstract for that?

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We could further relate this to another Hegelian point, namely the way in which Hegel conceives the difference between understanding (*Verstand*) and reason (*Vernunft*). Maurice Blanchot draws our attention to this in an essay written back in 1964, in the context and at the peak of the Cold War, when the possibility of total nuclear destruction was literally just a “push of a button” away. Blanchot’s

¹⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 117.

essay, with the truly inspired title “The Apocalypse is Disappointing”, resonates strongly in our present social and political context. I have written on it extensively elsewhere, and here I would just like to bring in one particular argument that relates directly to the issue of courage, fear, and survival.

Drawing on the Hegelian distinction between the notions of understanding and reason, Blanchot’s diagnosis is – to put it very simply – that humanity is stuck at, caught in, the logic and functioning of understanding (and of the “abstract negation” that characterizes it). Understanding, he writes, is cold and without fear. It analyses a danger, subjects it to its measures, and looks for solutions, strategies, adjustments. This work is useful; it demystifies the apocalypse and shows that it is possible to live with it (and the normalization/adaptation discussed earlier in this article is precisely this: we are learning how to make do with the apocalypse.) Blanchot continues: “It shows that the alternative of all or nothing, which turns the atomic weapon in a quasi-mystical force, is far from being the only truth of our situation. [...] Yes, this lesson of understanding is sound. Only, it is almost too sound, because it exposes us to a loss of fear, the fear that misleads but also warns.”¹⁷

This is the last sentence of the essay, and it does not explicate in what sense the term fear is used here. Our interpretative intervention would be to cut the sentence short (“exposes us to a loss of fear”, full stop), and relate it to Hegel’s discussion of the dread in which pure negativity makes our whole being tremble.

The quoted passage from Blanchot also brings us back to several of the themes discussed earlier in the context of disavowal. It brings us to the importance of knowledge (“cold analysis”), of calling things by their names and “maintaining no illusions,” as well as to what looks like the “crazy heroism” of our attitude toward the changing world, and toward catastrophes that are becoming part of it. (We would rather die than let ourselves be scared to death...)

So, what to make of this loss of fear? It does not mean that we have become so brave that we are no longer afraid of anything; it does not speak of our courage,

¹⁷ Maurice Blanchot, “The Apocalypse is Disappointing”, trans. E. Rottenberg, in *Friendship*, W. Hamacher and D. E. Wellbery (eds.), Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 108.

but rather of our perception of the world in which, with necessary adjustments, everything can be solved...

In our apocalyptic world, in the smooth run of normalization and adaptation to one problematic thing after another, when our attitude toward the world is so “sound” that it is actually *all too sound*, true scares occur from time to time. But can they scare us to death, so to say? Can they scare us so much that we start fighting, organizing for our lives, and switch from the survival mode of coping with things one day at a time (and as comfortably as possible), to a common struggle for our (future) lives? These two meanings of “survival” are not the same. To say that nothing can scare us to death is not to say that we do not feel scared and insecure; of course we do, most of the time even, but this “*living in fear*” (and insecurity) is quite different than the experience of mortal fear (or of “trembling in every fibre of our being,” as Hegel terms it) and of the cut that this pure negativity presents in the immediacy of our lives.

We thus have the dubious courage to *endure to the end*. And “the end” still persists here as the ultimate point on the horizon, as well as a source of (morbid) fascination. It is also here that a shift in perspective is needed. Today, the most lucid analysts do not warn against what will happen if we press the wrong buttons; they rather insist that the wrong button *has already been pressed*, several of them even. The apocalypse has already started and is becoming an active part of our life and our world, such as it is. It is not waiting for us somewhere in the future, but is dictating our social, economic, and environmental conditions as we speak.

In his play *Endgame* Beckett comes up with the famous line: “*The end is in the beginning, and then you go on.*”¹⁸ I would slightly modify this for the purposes of the present argument, and say: The end is in the middle, in the midst of a crisis, and we (need to) keep returning to it. The end is not a finality; it is not what crises *lead to*. The end is not in the endpoint; we should not think of it as an endpoint, but more as something like an *impasse* (a “*dead end*”) to which we need

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¹⁸ For an inspired reading of this line in the broader context of the “figures of the end”, see Tadej Troha, *Intervencije v nepovratno*, Ljubljana, Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo, 2015, pp. 72–107.

return, again and again. Not in order to simply avoid dying “in the end,” but rather in order to *die better*, to paraphrase another Beckettian line.

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