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## Disorientation in a Time of the Absence of Limits<sup>1</sup>

### Topological Subversion of the Inside/Outside Divide

In one of his most recent seminars, “Comment vivre et penser en un temps d’absolu désorientation?”, Badiou describes the major predicament of our time in terms of what he calls “the implacable disorientation of humanity”<sup>2</sup>. This disorientation, according to Badiou, is due primarily to “the disappearance of any politics aiming at its disalienation with respect to the laws of the market that reduce existence to the dialectic of work and the commodity.”<sup>3</sup> But if capitalism, even in its current disastrous variety, which has been called “authoritarian liberalism”, is far from collapsing, we should ask ourselves, “what are we being asked to be, for the sake of the planetary commercial order, so that we are willing to tolerate it without making too much of a fuss”?<sup>4</sup> Capitalism has little to fear, claims Badiou, so long as it can rely on the individualistic obsession with being myself, which allows us to “imagine that we are free individuals”<sup>5</sup>. On the contrary, it is precisely this narcissistic cult that stands in the way of any attempt to think and practice that which is and must be common to all. Thus, in order to be able to come to grips with the current subjective disorientation, the first step towards a new orientation in thought and existence, as Badiou outlines it, is to

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<sup>2</sup> Alain Badiou, “Comment vivre et penser en un temps d’absolue désorientation”, lesson of 4 October 2021. Transcription available at [http://www.entrettemps.asso.fr/Badiou/21-22.html?fbclid=IwAR1oOVauXtOuGfACRHIjSXRDLmBzDgRf87rpEQxokTe\\_gzC-5PakoiHack](http://www.entrettemps.asso.fr/Badiou/21-22.html?fbclid=IwAR1oOVauXtOuGfACRHIjSXRDLmBzDgRf87rpEQxokTe_gzC-5PakoiHack), accessed 4 November 2021.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

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break with the tyranny of liberal individualism, “the cult of the individual as the major prescription of the capitalist order”<sup>6</sup>.

Curiously enough, it is to poetry, which, for Badiou, is always at the service of any project of orienting oneself in thought and existence, that we have to turn, if we are to forge an idea of what a true politics can and must be, in view of its present disappearance. It may come as a surprise that Badiou might find one of the keys to the reconceptualization of such a politics in one of Emily Dickinson’s most famous poems from her earlier works:

I’m Nobody! Who are you?  
 Are you—Nobody—too?  
 Then there’s a pair of us!  
 Don’t tell! They’d advertise—you know!  
 How dreary—to be—Somebody!  
 How public—like a Frog—  
 To tell one’s name—the livelong June—  
 To an admiring Bog!

In this poem, to follow Badiou’s reading, Dickinson exploits the possibilities of anonymity, impersonality and insignificance as a means to go beyond the “fetishism of the self” in order to build “a generic and egalitarian humanity”<sup>7</sup> in which the nominally identified singularity of its members is of no account. In light of this, Badiou can boldly claim that the Ulysses-like proclaiming of “I’m Nobody!” is used by Dickinson, “this very first communist, without knowing it,” as a means to break with “the narcissistic imperative” with a view to building “a community of the anonymous”.<sup>8</sup> While removing the burden of being myself, an individual taken in his/her singularity and thus incomparable to any other individual, may well constitute a necessary precondition for the possibility of the politics of emancipation today, it does not, by itself, provide a sufficient condition for what is thus atomized, disoriented humanity, in which each of its atoms is pinned to its proper place in the world by its proper name, to enter what Badiou calls “a community of the anonymous”.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

To clarify this murky point, it is in poetry, again, more precisely, in Pier Paolo Pasolini's poem "Victory", that Badiou looks for a guideline.<sup>9</sup> It is revealing that Badiou reads it as "a manifesto for a true negation"<sup>10</sup>, which is not to be understood in terms of mere opposition, as the latter remains entangled with power and is, as a result, unable to propose the transformation of the structuring law of the world we live in, since such a transformation would require what Badiou calls "the creative dialectic of affirmation and negation"<sup>11</sup>. In order to unpack the

<sup>9</sup> Badiou quotes the following fragment from Pasolini's "Victory":

"All politics is Realpolitik," warring  
soul, with your delicate anger!  
You do not recognize a soul other than this one  
which has all the prose of the clever man,  
of the revolutionary devoted to the honest  
common man (even the complicity  
with the assassins of the Bitter Years grafted  
onto protector classicism, which makes  
the communist respectable): you do not recognize the heart  
that becomes slave to its enemy, and goes  
where the enemy goes, led by a history  
that is the history of both, and makes them, deep down,  
perversely, brothers; you do not recognize the fears  
of a consciousness that, by struggling with the world,  
shares the rules of the struggle over the centuries,  
as through a pessimism into which hopes  
drown to become more virile. Joyous  
with a joy that knows no hidden agenda,  
this army — blind in the blind  
sunlight — of dead young men comes  
and waits. If their father, their leader, absorbed  
in a mysterious debate with Power and bound  
by its dialectics, which history renews ceaselessly —  
if he abandons them,  
in the white mountains, on the serene plains,  
little by little in the barbaric breasts  
of the sons, hate becomes love of hate,  
burning only in them, the few, the chosen.  
Ah, Desperation that knows no laws!  
Ah, Anarchy, free love  
of Holiness, with your valiant songs!

In Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Poems*, selected and translated by Norman MacAfee with Luciano Martinengo, London, Random House, 1982.

<sup>10</sup> Badiou, "Comment vivre et penser en un temps d'absolu désorientation".

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

complexity of such a dialectic in a time in which politics seems to be impossible, it is necessary to examine the impotence of the two ways in which negation manifests itself today. There is, on the one hand, the fathers' negation, which can only lead to a status quo and a stalemate, a negation which is indistinguishable from acceptance of the existing situation, inasmuch as it admits that "the laws of history", as Pasolini points out, "are the same for us and for our enemies"<sup>12</sup>. And on the other hand, there is the sons' negation. The latter is characterized by the rejection of their fathers' complicity with power. As a result, it is condemned to manifest itself in a series of destructive, yet entirely ineffective rebellions.

There is perhaps no better way to shed some light on the present unbinding of the (revolutionary, yet through their complicity with power, compromised) fathers and the (suicidal, rebellious) sons than to draw some lessons from an intriguing account of this impasse, which appears to be itself a direct consequence of the ruin of politics, that can be found in Jean-Claude Milner's book, *Constat*.<sup>13</sup> In particular and crucially, Milner's account of this political deadlock corresponds to his larger account of a far-reaching mutation of the relationship between thought and the rebellion of the body. According to Milner, politics maintains its pre-eminence so long as it is grounded in the conjunction of thought and rebellion. What is meant by politics, is nothing less than the capacity of thought to produce material effects in the social field, the privileged figure of these effects being the insurrection of the social body. Seen from this perspective, the defeat or retreat of the emancipatory politics (in this reading, identified with politics *tout court*) that we have been witnessing since the 1970s reveals the powerlessness of contemporary thought to translate its effects into rebellion.

It should be noted, however, that this postulation of the thought-rebellion link suggests no 'natural' affinity between the two. On the contrary, if the emergence of the conjunction of thought and rebellion marks the break of modernity in the domain of politics, as Milner claims, this is only due to the fact that modern political thought, in opposition to classical thought which precludes the very idea of linking these two heterogeneous terms, is centred around their 'unnatural' union. Indeed, for classical political philosophy, grounded in the assumption of the unbridgeable gap between thought and the body, rebellion,

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Claude Milner, *Constat*, Paris, Verdier, 1992.

situated in the somatic moment rather than in thought, represents the impossible-real of politics and, thus, remains inconceivable. The linking of thought and rebellion, that is, of two ultimately incompatible entities, inasmuch as the latter is designated as the negation of the former, would, then, mark the invention of a new politics. Setting out from the assumption that there is no intrinsic bond between the body and thought, nor a common ground upon which they could initially meet, modernity is assigned the task of providing a basis for their conjunction. As Milner rightly observes, in the modern universe of science (this being a universe without beyond, a universe that knows of no limit and no measure), thought and rebellion cannot meet. Hence, a third instance must intervene to make their union possible. This task of grounding the binding of thought and rebellion is assigned, according to Milner, to ethics, or, to be even more precise, to the “ethics of the maximum”. This is because only an ‘extremist’ ethics, one that drives the subject beyond the possible into the impossible, that requires a finite, mortal speaking being to act as if s/he were immortal, can establish a link between thought and the body, thus providing a proper grounding for a politics that would constitute a proper way out in the infinite universe. Seen in this perspective, the way out, conceived as a politics of emancipation, appears to be less a matter of redemption, of repairing a wrong done to victims, than an experience of exploring the unheard-of, indeed ‘impossible’, possibilities of a given situation.

We can understand now why the emancipationist paradigm, so construed, is condemned to collapse once the alliance of thought and rebellion starts to falter and the process of their dissociation sets in. What is striking about Milner’s account is the judiciousness with which the negative implications of the process of disjunction, of the drifting apart of thought and rebellion that we are witnessing today, are brought to the fore: thought ceases to be politically subversive; worse, thought is worth its name only by being conservative, hostile to all forms of rebellion, while rebellion, on the other hand, is true to its nature only by expressing itself through a thoughtless, headless brutality. Put another way, thought marks the dissociation from rebellion by its growing powerlessness to produce material effects in the political and social field, whereas rebellion indicates its break with thought by turning into a resistance against thought, in short, by being the unthought. The present antinomic relationship between thought and rebellion can thus be accounted for in terms of a forced choice between ‘I am

(not)' and 'I am (not) thinking'.<sup>14</sup> Confronted with the disjunction, according to which I am, the corporeal presence, there where I am not thinking and vice versa, rebellion assuredly opts for the 'I am' and therefore for the 'I am not thinking', suggesting that what is lost in this forced choice in any case is precisely a rebellious, emancipatory thought, a thought capable of inciting rebellion in the social body. This is evident in Badiou's comments on Pasolini's poem, insofar as that which in *Vitoria* is presented as a deadlock (namely the antinomy between thought and rebellion), is proposed as a first step towards a novel orientation in thought and existence.

For a politics of emancipation to be possible and adequate to the challenges of our time it is necessary to create the conditions for the possibility of an effective negation, one that would bring together fathers and sons, by mobilizing both, thought and rebellion. For this to be possible in the present situation in which politics is only conceivable in terms of *Realpolitik*, the seemingly unquestionable evidence, according to which "the laws of history are the same for us and for our enemies"<sup>15</sup>, must be put into question, otherwise, that is to say, under the present conditions, where all resistance turns inevitably into complicity with power, there is no hope for a politics that would truly challenge ingrained power structures. Thus, for a radical change to take place in our time, the rebellious nihilistic youth has to engage in a dialectic between the affirmation of a new world that would be liberated from the tyranny of the individual's tiny liberties, and the inevitable destructive negation, yet one that would be at the service of the affirmation of a new world.

Hence, what is required is an almost impossible topological operation. It is an operation by means of which, instead of with the relationship of pure exteriority between fathers – who, while being "responsible for the collective emancipatory orientation", that is, responsible for there being something like the thought of emancipation, by accepting the current *Realpolitik*, are guilty of being accomplices of power – and sons – who, let down by their fathers, are condemned to a thoughtless revolt, or, in Badiou's words, "a kind of collective nihilist suicide,"<sup>16</sup> –

<sup>14</sup> For further elaborations on the forced choice, see Jacques Lacan, *Logique du phantasme*, unpublished seminar (1966–67).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

we will be dealing with a relationship that will allow for a paradoxical continuity between the inside and the outside by bringing the outside into the very interiority of the political space and, vice versa, by pushing the inside towards an uncomfortable exteriority. But this is only possible if the figure of the father is split, divided between the “founding father”, so to speak, i.e., the law-instituting agency, and the father as the emancipatory agency striving for the transformation of the existing world. To be able to accomplish these two, at first sight incompatible tasks, the father, according to Badiou (and Pasolini), would have to adopt the stance of a paradoxical immanent negation, a kind of strategic posture of resistance. The figure of the son, by contrast, insofar as he is seen as the exteriority made flesh, since the son, according to Pasolini and Badiou, incarnates a thoughtless barbaric revolt, would, instead of being condemned to a pure exteriority which predestines him to suicide, be situated, precisely due to his exteriority, as an “extimate positionality” vis-à-vis the position of the subject required and modelled by the dominant discourse.

Before proceeding any further to a consideration of the implications of this diagnosis of the current impasse for contemporary thought and politics as well as for a possible way out of this predicament, we must examine what, if anything at all, psychoanalysis can offer in terms of a possible way out, insofar as psychoanalysis, like politics, confronts the problem of the subject’s disorientation. It is therefore necessary to see what psychoanalysis means by this notion. It is noteworthy that psychoanalysis tackles the problem of the current disorientation starting from the always traumatic encounter between the signifier and the body which orients psychoanalysis towards the singular, the “like no other”, the inassimilable, in short, the incomparable. The emphasis on the incomparable which, as the word itself makes obvious, is an objection to comparing, imposes on psychoanalysis the treatment of the singular as an experience of the absence of all criteria, of guarantees, in a word, as the experience of a kind of “destitution”, to borrow Lacan’s expression.<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting that Lacan uses the expression “scattered” and “ill-assorted individuals” in order to characterize “those who are prepared to run the risk of attesting at best to the lying truth” in the pass that he refrains from imposing it “on one and all because, as it hap-

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<sup>17</sup> Jacques Lacan, *My Teaching*, trans. D. Macay, London/New York, Verso, 2009, p. 113.

pens, there is no all but only ill-assorted oddments.”<sup>18</sup> We cannot but notice the distance that separates Lacan in his orientation towards the singular which targets the irreducible *jouissance*, the kernel, which is the most incomparable and the most real in each of us, and his quasi-scientific ambition in the “Proposition on the Psychoanalyst of the School” that refers to the “culmination of experience, its compilation and elaboration, an ordering of its varieties, a notation of its degrees.”<sup>19</sup> If psychoanalysis targets the singular, there is no *matheme* for this, only the singular, incomparable ways of naming something that appears to be unsayable. Does the focus on the singular, incomparable, inassimilable inevitably point to relativism?

At first sight, it may seem that Badiou makes a similar point, but with a slightly different emphasis. The dominant ideology of our times that he calls “democratic materialism” is characterised by what Badiou terms its axiom rendered in a single, condensed statement: “*There are only bodies and languages.*”<sup>20</sup> As the globalisation of relativism, the epoch of democratic materialism can be described as the post-truth epoch. The very term “post-truth”, which inscribes truth in a temporal dimension, clearly indicates that the era of truth is somehow behind us, thereby marking a remarkable devaluation of truth. Hence, if the reference to truth seems to have lost all of its authoritative appeal and power of conviction for contemporary subjects, this is precisely to the extent that the relationship to truth is grounded in a relationship to the Other and knowledge, both called into question and splintered into fragments with the emergence of a new symbolic order. Indeed, what characterises this new symbolic order that produces subjects as its effects is the inconsistency of the Other.

### The Crisis of Belief and the Lying Truth

The inconsistent Other signals a major shift in the organisation of our world: from the universalist paradigm – according to which the world is organised by the master-signifier marking a constitutive exception that assures the unity and

<sup>18</sup> Lacan, Jacques, “Preface to the English Edition of *Seminar XI*”, trans. R. Grigg, *The Lacanian Review*, (6/2018), pp. 25–27.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Proposition of 9 October 1967 on the Psychoanalyst of the School,” trans. R. Grigg, *Analysis* (6/1995), p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds. Being and Event II*, trans. A. Toscano, London/New York, Continuum, 2009, p. 1.



totality of the world – to the paradigm of globalisation and non-totalisability, a paradigm according to which the world is organised by a host of master-signifiers whose very multiplicity prevents the world from constituting a whole, a unity. Elaborating on the structural shifts in the symbolic order and the production of a social not-all, Lacan proposes a striking image of what he calls a “buzzing swarm” of  $S_{1s}$ : “From the *one-among-others* – and the point is to know whether it is any old which one – arises an  $S_1$ , a signifying swarm, a buzzing swarm [...] the swarm or master signifier, is that which assures the unity, the unity of the subject’s copulation with knowledge.”<sup>21</sup> A swarm without an outside is a much better image of our globalised world, which was made possible through a peculiar alliance between the discourse of science and capitalism that has produced a new figure of the master, one that is seeking to impose what could be called a subjective rectification on a mass scale. The image of our globalised world is that of a world that is both open to all, all-inclusive, so to speak, and hostile to exceptions. Evidence of this ambiguity that characterises the present conjuncture can be seen in the injunction of today’s superego, forcing the subject to find his/her position in the social bond by passively “accepting” a place that is already provided for him/her. In the globalised world, with its imposition of mass communication, where contemporary subjects have found themselves trapped in the contradictory demands for transparency, mass narcissism and the quantification of being, the dominant social bond is the negation of all bonds as it manifests itself as an untotalisable, open series of homogeneous, identical Ones.

Seen from the perspective of the inconsistency of the Other, the post-truth era can be considered to be an era emerging from a crisis in belief in the existence of the Other, which is to be taken in a twofold sense: as a belief in the Other’s authority (the Other of the Other, that is, the Other of Law) and a belief in the Other designated as the subject that is supposed to know. The contemporary subject does not want to know anything about this “condition of belief” without which no knowledge, and therefore no truth, are possible. Hence, the crisis of belief not only affects the Other. It also affects the subject. This can be seen in the fact that the failing belief in the Other and knowledge, considered as a distinctive feature of our profoundly unbelieving times, is accompanied by an

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX. On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. B. Fink, London, W.W. Norton & Company, 1999, p. 143.

unprecedented rise in anxiety at the social level, as contemporary subjects who do not believe in the (existence of the) Other are singularly defenceless before the irruption of the real. With truth losing its power to name the real, the subject itself as a singular response to the real is becoming ever more precarious. Which is why, when faced with the erratic irruption of the real, contemporary subjects are condemned to a desperate search for certainties.

To shed some light on the present quest for certainty – the only option that appears to be open to the subject in these uncertain times – we should turn to psychoanalysis. It is noteworthy that, for Freud and Lacan alike, certainty is to be distinguished from belief, indeed, it should rather be situated on the side of unbelief. Lacan's elucidation of the Freudian notion of *Unglauben*, usually translated as unbelief, can help us clarify what appears to be an almost counter-intuitive opposition between belief and certainty. To grasp what is at stake in belief, according to Lacan, we have to distinguish between “the divided subject”, who believes, and “the subject supposed to know”, to whom we grant credit. Unbelief, by contrast, is not simply the negation of belief; as Lacan clearly points out, it “is not the *not believing in it*, but the absence of the term in which is designated the division of the subject.”<sup>22</sup> To the extent that unbelief refers to the absence of the first element constitutive of belief – the divided subject – what characterises unbelief, according to Lacan, is the solidity and the “mass seizure of the primitive signifying chain,” which “forbids the dialectical opening that is manifested in the phenomenon of belief.”<sup>23</sup> Hence, although paranoia seems to be stirred by belief, as Lacan notes, it should be situated on the side of unbelief since it is the latter which, due to the exclusion of dialectics between belief and knowledge, involves the search for certainty, which is one of the defining traits of paranoia. So, how are we to account for the present apparent decline of belief in the Other at the level of contemporary subjects, on the one hand, and the obsessive quest for certainty, on the other?

While disbelief, suspicion, and a total absence of trust have been recognised by a number of contemporary thinkers as a telling sign of our profoundly unbelieving era, certain disquieting phenomena, such as the rise of conspiracy theories,

<sup>22</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar, Book IX, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. A. Sheridan, London, Peguin, 1979, p. 238.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

cannot simply be explained away by referring to the collapse of belief, but need to be related instead to unbelief – to be taken in the sense of *Un glauben*, a term used by Freud in relation to paranoia where blame is ascribed to the Other, who is considered to be responsible for the paranoiac's troubles. Distrust, one of the primary symptoms of paranoia, is now considered to constitute a common trait of contemporary subjects.

The phenomenon of conspiracism can certainly be seen as one of the most striking indicators of the frantic quest for certainties we are currently witnessing. In the current climate of incredulity, conspiracy theories arise from a drive for certainty whose true source is a paranoid defence against the real. This also explains why the contemporary subject prefers *automaton* to *tuché*, a term Lacan borrows from Aristotle to name the unpredictable, erratic encounter with the lawless real. The rise in contemporary conspiracism can be seen as a phenomenon resonating with the structure of paranoia in the Lacanian sense, where the delusional constructions of the paranoiac are precisely compensatory make-believes that try to fill the gap where the absent master signifier, whose role is to allow a socio-symbolic structure to constitute itself, should be. In this way, contemporary conspiracism both reveals the inconsistency of the Other and covers it up with the construction of a semblant of the master signifier. Because the master signifier is lacking, various scraps of the symbolic are used as temporary quilting points to restrain or contain the unbridled jouissance. In busying itself with the construction of the absent master signifier, conspiracism can be viewed as a delusional production of semblants of the exception in a paranoid attempt to hold onto the master's discourse. But contemporary conspiracy theories could also be seen as a response to the collapse of belief in the subject supposed to know. Designed to make sense of a chaotic, senseless world, conspiracy theories strive to fill the interpretative vacuum by promising to make clear what was once obscure and confusing. But in order to do so, conspiracy theories are obliged to postulate some evil Other whose scheming and machinations are responsible for otherwise inexplicable effects. This explains why distrust is the principal cause of conspiracism, and, indeed, it is precisely this trait that links it to paranoia.

Thus, in an era in which the Other is denounced as a semblant, we must understand what a semblant is, especially if we are to take our distance from the conspiracy theorists' approach where the semblant is nothing but a deceptive

appearance. In introducing the dimension of *jouissance*, Lacanian psychoanalysis allows us to consider the semblant as having three interrelated roles: firstly, it plugs the gap from which anxiety arises. Secondly, it is itself a form of *jouissance* or, more appropriately, a surplus-*jouissance* to the extent precisely that in a particular situation the subject prefers the semblant to the “real thing”, the absence of which it covers; characteristically, in allowing the subject to draw from it a certain amount of surplus *jouissance*, this experience outweighs the semblant’s deception, which is why the semblant is marked by a fetishistic disavowal: “I know, but all the same.” Thirdly, the semblant takes on the function of the quilting point. At the level of the symbolic, the phallus, the Name-of-the-Father, or the master signifier stands for the semblant of exception. Where conspiracy theories promise to finish with deceptive appearances in order to reach the real hiding behind them, the psychoanalytic approach does not claim to be able to access the truth of the real except by means of semblants.

But what status can be assigned to the real if truth is no longer the place where the real comes to be named and to be symbolised? Indeed, of which real does one speak today? Curiously, this question, i.e. What is the real?, while it might appear to be the inevitable departure point, is, in fact, a question that could not, or to be even more precise, should not be formulated, because, if we are to follow Miller, “the very form in which it is presented is not appropriate to the elaboration of the real as it imposes itself in the analytic experience.” This is because “the very procedure of definition” is one that “is appropriate to the search for a truth, whereas the real is not adjusted to this.”<sup>24</sup> Hence, properly understood, “the real is not adjusted to the truth,” nor therefore to an interrogation seeking the truth about the real by way of a definition. Its elaboration has to be pursued instead by an examination of the responses of the real.<sup>25</sup> This is precisely the path taken by Lacan, who gave various characterisations of the real in the course of his teaching, insisting on the very instability of the concepts by means of which he tried to localise the real proper to the analytic experience. Insisting on the variability itself of these solutions, Miller calls these variations “the amphibologies of the real.”<sup>26</sup> This is because the real does not always mean the

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<sup>24</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, *L'expérience du réel dans la cure analytique*, 1998–1999, unpublished.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, *L'Être et l'Un*, lesson of 2 February 2011, unpublished.

same thing in Lacan's use, which allows us to distinguish three principle conceptualisations that can be found in Lacan, as outlined below.

The first notion of the real forged by Lacan is one according to which the real is simply situated outside the analytic experience. The real here is a real prior to and exterior to the effects of the signifier, which is precisely what the analytic experience deals with. This preceding and exterior real is not to be confused with the psychoanalytic real, which, at the beginning of Lacan's teaching, is nothing but the signified itself. The real is considered to be meaning. The second notion of the real is one in which the real is situated from the perspective of the signifier. At this stage of Lacan's teaching, which addresses the alliance of psychoanalysis and science, the unconscious itself is deemed to be evidence that there is a knowledge in the real, hence the real presents itself under the guise of knowledge. And just as with the real in science, this real identified with a knowledge is a real regulated by a law. It is only with Lacan's final teaching that we are dealing with the "real" real since the real here is assimilated with the inassimilable traumatic encounter, to a *tuché* as essentially a failed encounter with the real.<sup>27</sup> In separating the real from the signifier and its laws, Lacan opens the perspective of "the real is without law."<sup>28</sup>

This formulation of the real as something distinct from the signifier and from knowledge, that is, from the semblant, requires an interrogation of the psychoanalytic use of semblants. Because what is a practice of psychoanalysis that operates by no other means than speech, when the real is conceived as that which evades speech itself, as something that rebels against its powers and which, ultimately, excludes meaning? Lacan is bothered by the semblant as the inevitable access to the real in psychoanalysis to the point of questioning whether psychoanalysis, from the perspective of the semblant, could itself be nothing but a swindle:

Contrary to what is said, there is no truth about the real, given that the real is professed as excluding meaning. It would nonetheless be too much to say that there is such a thing as the real, because saying this is to suppose a meaning. The word real itself has a meaning, and I myself played with evoking the echo of the word

<sup>27</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar, Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, pp. 53–64.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XXIII, Le sinthome*, Paris, Seuil, 2005, p. 137.

*reus*, which in Latin means culpable – one is more or less culpable of the real. This is why psychoanalysis is something serious, and it is not absurd to say that it could slide into becoming a swindle.”<sup>29</sup>

It is precisely at this point that the relationship between truth and the real requires some additional clarification. If the Latin *veritas*, designating truth and reality, signals that these two notions, i.e. truth and the real, have been almost synonymous since the Middle Ages, today they have drifted apart. For psychoanalysis, the question of truth is therefore primarily the question of its articulation with the real. Hence, if the experience of an analysis still presents itself to the speaking being as a quest for the truth about his/her being, there is nevertheless a shift in emphasis: from a position that turns the truth of the unconscious into the *agalma* of the analytic experience, to a position that uncovers the incapacity of truth, indeed, its powerlessness to name the real, to name that which, for a speaking subject, irrupts as a meaningless, which is to say, impossible traumatic encounter with jouissance.

Thus, for the Lacan of the 1950s, “in psychoanalytic anamnesis, what is at stake is not reality, but truth,”<sup>30</sup> precisely to the extent that, in rediscovering the power of truth in our very flesh, an analysis allows true speech to restore the subject’s history where there had been a blank, an absence, and situates truth at the heart of psychoanalysis’s concerns since it aims to uncover the power of the truth in the speaking being’s body, because the truth of the symptom takes hold of the body, and inscribes itself in the flesh of the living body.

Yet, for late Lacan, the quest for truth would rather not only mark its inability to change anything in the existence of the subject, but would also make a hole into which the subject can fall, and from which it is up to the subject to try to pull him-/herself out, by undoing, through words, what was hollowed out for him/her in his/her existence. Thus, in discovering that truth is not the final word of the analytic experience, Lacan will be forced to explore the consequences of the untying of the truth and the real in his last teaching, yet this disentanglement of

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XXIV, L’insu que sait de l’une-bévue s’aile à mourre*, (1976–1977), lesson of 15 March 1977, published in *Ornicar?* (17–18/1979), p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis”, in *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink, New York / London, W.W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. 213.

the true and the real will be accomplished not in the name of a post-truth, as one might assume, but rather in the name of a truth that holds onto the real.

This emphasis on the powerlessness of truth in grasping the real in psychoanalysis leads Lacan towards an examination of the effects of the signifier on the speaking body. Behind – or rather below – the effects of meaning that Freudian and early Lacanian psychoanalysis aims at deciphering and interpreting, there are effects that appear to be clearly meaningless and that psychoanalysis strives to circumscribe not via the signifier, but rather via writing. It is precisely the affinity between truth and the signifier, on the one hand, and the alliance between the real and the letter or writing, on the other, that leads Lacan to distinguish the domain of meaning as that of the signifier and the domain of the real as that of the letter: “Writing, the letter, is in the real, and the signifier is in the symbolic.”<sup>31</sup>

Lacan called this last version of truth – the truth with regard to the effects of an encounter with the real, i.e. a truth that aims at circumscribing what is written in the real – the “lying truth”.<sup>32</sup> In this sense, truth is always, to some extent, of the order of fiction, but, paradoxically, it is only by means of this fiction that something of the real can be said. Truth therefore has a function in psychoanalysis on the condition that we start from its powerlessness rather than its omnipotence, as it is only by encountering what cannot be said that it evokes all that it cannot say; ultimately, on the condition that it recognises that about the real, it lies.

It is only on the condition of holding onto the impossible, only insofar as it aims at the real, that truth still has a role to play in psychoanalysis. As Lacan says in *Television*: “I always speak the truth. Not the whole truth, because there’s no way to say it. Saying it all is literally impossible: words fail. Yet it’s through this very impossibility that the truth holds onto the real.”<sup>33</sup> For the truth that holds onto the real is the truth that does not seek to give meaning to a traumatic event, i.e. an encounter with *jouissance*, while starting out with the obscurity of its

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVIII, D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, Paris, Seuil, 2006, p. 122.

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Preface to the English Edition of *Seminar XI*”, trans. R. Grigg, *The Lacanian Review*, (6/2018), p. 22.

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, ed. Joan Copjec, New York/London, W.W. Norton & Company, 1990, p. 209.

effects. It is that which sometimes leads the subject to invent a name in order to say the unsayable. A name that aims to say the impossible to symbolise it.

### In Guise of Conclusion

If believing is to believe in the Other, then the loss of belief primarily concerns the domain of semblance, those phenomena, namely, that depend on belief, the phenomena that can be situated on the side of “make-believe”. In this respect, the role of the semblant is that of a defence against the disruptive real. The current climate of incredulity and the total loss of trust can be explained by another essential feature of our times: that of a generalised semblantification. The contemporary subject, enlightened by deconstruction and cultural relativism, already knows that there is no such thing as “objective reality”, that reality is a symbolic construction. For this subject, who, because he/she does not believe in the Other, demands certainty, i.e. proofs, everything is semblance, a make-believe.

If psychoanalysis is being profoundly reconfigured in its continuous effort to bring its theory and practice up to date, it is crucial that psychoanalysts, as interpreters of our time, a role Lacan ascribed to analysts in guiding the subject through the evolution of semblants of civilization since the mutation of the Other of civilization leads to a modification of the modality and usages of jouissance,<sup>34</sup> take account of the profound change in the matrix of civilisation captured in Lacan’s condensed formula: “There is no Other of the Other.” Indeed, for psychoanalysis, the crisis of belief, insofar as it affects the semblant, raises the question of how to operate in times of incredulity and a lack of belief in the Other with the means proper to psychoanalysis, that is to say, with semblants.

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Analytic discourse does not lend itself to any form of mass subjective rectification, because it draws its power precisely from what is demassifying. Rather, psychoanalysis accompanies the subject in his/her protest against the discontents of civilisation. The task of psychoanalysis is to accompany the subject in his/her solitude, in his/her own exile, there where only the One all alone exists.

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<sup>34</sup> “Psychoanalysis has played a role in the direction of modern subjectivity, and it cannot sustain this role without aligning it with the movement in modern science that elucidates it.” Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” p. 235.



But this path is not without risks. Instead of interpreting the subject based on his/her sayings, slips of the tongue, contradictions, psychoanalysis today grounds its interpretation on what the body “says”, i.e., on *jouissance* that affects it. It is as if psychoanalysis sets out from the assumption that it is the body that tells the truth, rather than the subject whose speech always fails in saying it all.

This may explain Lacan’s move that concludes one of the chapters in *Seminar XX*: “The real ... is the mystery of the speaking body, the mystery of the unconscious.”<sup>35</sup> Although it may seem that in his last teaching Lacan claims that the speaking body *is* the unconscious, this may appear to be misleading. Indeed, Lacan was extremely careful in making this distinction. Referring to this point, Lacan claimed: “It is to the extent that the unconscious is not without reference to the body that I think the function of the real can be distinguished from it.”<sup>36</sup> This distinction allows, in addition, a further distinction, namely a distinction between the effects of the signifier on the speaking body: there are, on the one hand, the traces of the signifier that affect the subject that have produced the effects of meaning and, on the other hand, the traces inscribed on the body that have produced *jouissance* effects. Consider the following remark by Lacan: “The drives are the echo in the body of the fact that something is said.”<sup>37</sup>

It is in light of this partition that Lacan can separate truth, whose reference is language, and the real of *jouissance*, whose reference is *lalangue*, the embodiment of the meaninglessness of the real to the extent that the signifiers of which *lalangue* consists are to be taken in their materiality, i.e., in their pure senselessness. In this regard, the term “symptom” is best suited for the signifier insofar as it aims at meaning, whereas the term “sinthome”, which incarnates the invisible, yet ineffaceable mark that is the remainder of the impact of the signifier on the body of the drive, to borrow Miller’s formulation, “pushes-toward-oneism”. Disconnected from the unconscious that calls for interpretation and meaning and detached from the Other, the sinthome is an invention of the speaking being that provides him/her with an identity, or, to be more exact, singularity, incomparability at the level of the *jouissance* of the speaking body. The One that

<sup>35</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX. Encore, On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge (1972–1973)*, p. 131.

<sup>36</sup> Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre XXIII, Le sinthome*, p. 135.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

is in question here is the one that stems from the singularity of *jouissance* of the speaking-being, *parlêtre*, that is to say, from what separates him/her from other Ones.

In dealing with the one-all-alone that is centred on modes of immediate *jouissance* that necessarily excludes the social bond insofar as the latter supposes both exchange and its misunderstandings, psychoanalysis appears to provide to the speaking being an apology for irresponsibility. In a society that is organised around the real produced through the alliance of capitalism and science only the day to day counts: hedonism, where *jouissance* for all would immediately curb *jouissance* of the *parlêtre*. Paradoxically, psychoanalysis in taking seriously its mission, i.e., to be part of this world, would not provide a solution, a way out, by manufacturing made-to-measure *sinthomes*, according to each singularity. This is not a solution precisely to the extent that it succeeds in reducing the *sinthome* to a semblant. One of the challenges to psychoanalysis in the era of the inexistent Other and the lawless real is rather the question of knowing how knowledge and time are to be tied together in order to obtain “*donc*”, therefore, that will stop the endless metonymy that characterises the world of globalisation. If “the question of the contingent future is the very place where the tension between knowledge and time becomes extreme,”<sup>38</sup> than the paradox that psychoanalysis has to deal with today is that only the contingent can become the limit of the *jouissance* offered in the current scientico-capitalistic conjecture. And it is up to the *parlêtre* to counter it, bypass it, quash it or, on the contrary, to make use of the *sinthome* which, despite the fact that it pushes towards the one-all-alone of the speaking being, can also provide a solution that allows the speaking-being, *parlêtre*, to deal more or less efficiently with social relations with others.

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<sup>38</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, “L’orientation lacanienne: Donc” (1993-1994), lesson of 1 December 1993 (unpublished).

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