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Introduction
Proud Illiteracy: Or, *Read My Desire* Again

Keywords
Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire*, psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, May 1968

Abstract
This article is the editorial introduction to a special issue of *Filozofski Vestnik* dedicated to Joan Copjec's 1994 book *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. It proposes that an enduring resistance to Copjec's insights across the theoretical humanities must be understood as a symptom of the radical shift in thinking the book provokes, disguised as a proud defense of the illiteracy of desire Copjec indicts. Tracking this proud illiteracy to its origins in the intellectual fallout from the 1968 student revolts in Paris, the author argues that returning to *Read My Desire* now, thirty years since its initial publication, can inform an engagement with student radicalism, and youth in revolt more generally, that is ethically responsive to the political and social exigencies of the present. The article concludes with a summary of the issue's other contributions and the ways in which they each introduce novel readings of *Read My Desire* that demonstrate the book's lasting impact and reiterate its still-unread potential.

Uvodnik:
Ponosna nepismenost ali *Read My Desire*, še enkrat

Ključne besede
Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire*, psihoanaliza, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, maj 1968

Povzetek
Članek je uvodni uredniški prispevek k posebni številki revije *Filozofski Vestnik*, posvečeni knjigi Joan Copjec iz leta 1994 z naslovom *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. V njem avtor predlaga, da je treba vztrajno nasprotovanje Copjecinim

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uvidom, ki ga lahko opazimo na področju teoretske humanistike, razumeti kot simptom radikalne spremembe v mišljenju, ki jo knjiga sproža, ta simptom pa je zakamufliran v ponosno zagovarjanje nepismenosti želje, kar Copjec kritizira. Avtor sledi tej ponosni nepismenosti do njenih izvorov v intelektualnih posledicah študentskih uporov v Parizu leta 1968 in trdi, da lahko vrnitev k *Read My Desire* zdaj, trideset let po njeni prvi izdaji, nekaj pove o študentskem radikalizmu in uporni mladini na splošno, na način, ki se etično odziva na politične in družbene zahteve sedanjosti. Članek se zaključi s povzetkom drugih prispevkov v tej številki in načinov, na katere vsak od njih uvaja nove interpretacije *Read My Desire*, ki dokazujejo trajen vpliv knjige in ponovno poudarjajo njen še neizkoriščen potencial.

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Let me recite what history
teaches. History teaches.
— Gertrude Stein[1]

[. . .] words fail.
— Jacques Lacan[2]

Still Not Reading

Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* was published more than three decades ago and the impasses it diagnosed in contemporary cultural critique have hardly budged. The upheaval her book ought to have represented for the theoretical humanities remains strangely unrealized. Read it again and you will find that this is oddly to the book's credit. It is positive proof of the central problem to which Copjec alerted us, had we managed to read her in the first place; a problem as endemic to culture writ large as it is to the supposedly more rarefied realms of high theory and academese, by no means confined to the historicism against which her analysis is explicitly addressed. The trouble,

1 "If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso," in *Selections*, ed. Joan Retallack (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 193.

2 *Television / A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, ed. Joan Copjec, trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 3.

our trouble, is this: the pervasive, stubborn illiteracy of desire her book treats cannot be set down to accidental ignorance. It is not as if desire were inscrutably inscribed in some dead language or simply nowhere inscribed at all. After more than a century of psychoanalysis, after the Freudian discovery and its Lacanian iteration, and now, after thirty more years of *Read My Desire*, this illiteracy can only be the effect of a willful misreading. A desire, then, not to read desire.

This is one meaning of what Copjec calls "historicism," by which she designates not so much a unified school of thought as that species of critique that reduces the whole of any social field only to "its indwelling network of relations of power and knowledge."[3] For all its insight and exactitude, for all the sense it makes, historicism by definition misses the indigestible remainder of the network's operations, the principle of its incompleteness—in a word, it misses everything history *is not*, but without which history would not be what it is. More than missing it, historicism delights in the oversight, as it "refuses to believe in repression and proudly professes to be *illiterate in desire*."[4] The historicists, both in the final quarter of the last century and the first quarter of the present one, under whatever epithets they are now encamped, want an ignorance of desire, which perforce means they do not, cannot, have it. Of course, this does not stop them proudly striving for it all the same.

In historicism's defense, it will be argued that this charge is misplaced and that it is, in fact, psychoanalysis that has stubbornly refused to get the message. Is not repression a retreat from history and the historicity of desire? Is the subject at its core, the subject of the unconscious, not merely another appeal to the transcendental, a new name at the center of an old and thoroughly discredited metaphysics?

This cuts to the heart of the proud illiteracy with which *Read My Desire* concerns us. Too easily, the psychoanalytic subject is conceived as if it precedes and transcends the historically specific, necessarily contingent web of power relations in which it is, in fact, constructed. Separated from these conditions, this model of the subject may be deployed as a universal law that flattens the

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3 Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 6.

4 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 14; emphasis in original.

infinite diversity of immanent subjectivities into only so many examples of itself. As the Gospel says, "Seek, and ye shall find." Given the institutional history of psychoanalysis, its excesses and complicities, its occasional scientism and mysticism, its fundamentalist and conservative tendencies, and, on its better days, its uncompromising commitment to a truth beyond reason, this misreading is far from unfair. But without surrendering desire to its total immanentization, Copjec articulates an alternative. Let us take up psychoanalysis, she insists, not as a disciplinary apparatus or a modern metaphysics, but rather as *a text* both constituted and driven by its failure to articulate its own cause, as the imperfect record of a dimension immanent to human being that refuses its total circumscription by the contingencies of its historical and social context. To accept this invitation to read the *negativity* of discourse, to read what it says without saying it, what it knows without wanting to know anything about it, what it does without intending it, and to do so interminably, is not to flee from immanence into transcendence; it is to read the interstices in discourse that mark its internal incoherence, and in this reading to mark them over again, finding or offering new ways for history to signify otherwise.

Copjec could not be more clear. Desire is neither origin nor destination. It is what incompletes the language to which it gives rise; desire is the disconnect between what language says and what it means to say; the gap where description falters and interpretation takes hold; the internal difference that renders any linguistically delimited field (including psychoanalysis) intrinsically contestable, incongruent, other to itself.

In this immanent opening to contestation, desire is negative and also generative. It is what says of any expedient that promises to rescue the subject from their historical, ideological entrapment, or even just to loosen ideology's grip on the subject, *This is not it*. Desire is there in the "not" that unknots the subject from the lure of an inevitably false fulfillment. "Desire," Copjec explains, "stems from the feeling of having been duped by language, cheated of something, not from our having been presented with a determinate object or goal for which we can aim."[5] But nor does psychoanalysis offer any expedients, any determinate objects or goals, of its own. Against every solution to the impasses of desire, every presumed escape, psychoanalysis can only say, *Read again*,

5 Copjec, 55.

desire again. Thus conceived as a literacy of desire, psychoanalysis is the theory, science, experience, and ethics of this incurable dissatisfaction. And who wants that?

In the first of several episodes of their popular *Why Theory* podcast dedicated to *Read My Desire*, Todd McGowan and Ryan Engley discuss just point while wondering how different the humanities might look today, had the book been more widely regarded upon its initial publication. "Sometimes," McGowan opines, "books are just too good. People just have no way to integrate what the book is doing because it's overthrowing the *a prioris* [sic] they are operating with."[6] To my ears, McGowan's hypothesis evokes the logic of the paradigm shift, which locates a zone of thought's resistance to radical realignment in the structure of its thinking. To accept the new parameters, the structure must overcome its own inertia. Old limits are broken, new ones are forged, fundamental concepts are recast, reinvented, or replaced, and change like this is never sudden, never easy, never realized without profound consequence.

We should take this further. A structure of thinking surely carries its own inertia, but the properly Lacanian point to which Copjec directs us, again and again, is that *there is no structure without a subject*.[7] From the position of the subject, structural integration entails a concomitant and painful disintegration; structural inertia is not a law of physics but a mode of defense. So, emphasizing Copjec's indictment of proud illiteracy, I ask us to consider that the slowness with which *Read My Desire* has accumulated its influence and legacy, as well as the paradigm-shifting work still to be done, are less a testament to its iconoclasm, less a problem of integration, than they are the signs of an unconscious and irrational resistance. In the language of psychoanalysis, the proud illiteracy of desire is a *symptom*. To borrow from the opening refrain in Lacan's

6 Todd McGowan and Ryan Engley, "Read My Desire, Pt. 1: Gaze and Excess," June 13, 2021, in *Why Theory* podcast, 1:18:16, https://creators.spotify.com/pod/profile/why-theory9/episodes/Read-My-Desire--Pt--1-Gaze-and-Excess-e2qgio3. Also see Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), an extended corrective to film theory following Copjec's critique of its "Foucauldization" of the gaze from *Read My Desire*.

7 This point is best illustrated through Lacan's friendly critique of Claude Lévi-Strauss; see Darian Leader, "Lacan's Myths," in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 35–49; and Jean-Michel Rabaté, "Lacan's Dora against Lévi-Strauss," *Yale French Studies* 123 (2013): 129–44.

Encore seminar, it is at once a recognition of and a resistance against what theory knows but wants to know nothing about.[8]

This curious dual logic of recognition and resistance is why, far from reconciling subjects of desire with the "indwelling network of relations of power and knowledge" comprising their historicity, far from reducing the subject to an individualized effect or instance of this network, yet without disavowing the weight of this networking and individualization, psychoanalysis is on the side of the symptom. For the symptom is a vital sign of the unconscious at work, unworking the nexus of power-knowledge that would constrain the subject within the established parameters of possibility. To treat the proud illiteracy of desire as a symptom means we cannot dismiss it as mere ignorance, incapacity, or stupidity. Nor can we reason with it to reason it away. Instead, we have to read it, as ever, negatively: as an instance of the very knowledge it wants to refuse, which, thus articulated, may open historicism to possibilities it has not allowed itself to imagine.

As the last thirty years of still not reading Copjec attest, to be on the side of this symptom is no easy ask. Illiteracy is a matter of remediation. *Proud* illiteracy is something else. It is a kind of happy defiance. And if it is motored, as Copjec argues, by a refusal to believe in repression, this defiance is also a *repression of repression*. Or, inasmuch as historicism does acknowledge repression, at least believes in it as an artifact within a history of ideas, it better exemplifies the psychoanalytic phenomenon of *disavowal*. As Alenka Zupančič explains, what distinguishes disavowal from repression is that the latter is a denial of the reality of some thing that threatens the subject's fragile self-coherence, whereas disavowal readily accepts the thing's reality, knows all about it, but denies the weight of this knowledge as if it were without consequence.[9] In either case, with repression or disavowal, we are faced with a formation that at once conceals and reveals an unpleasant, unintegrated, disintegrating desire.

8 Jacques Lacan, *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–1973*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 1–2.

9 Alenka Zupančič, *Disavowal* (Hoboken, NJ: Polity, 2024), 14–18; on the ontological stakes of the difference between repression and disavowal, see esp. 58–70.

What sort of refusal, repression, disavowal, and desire are at stake in this particular symptom? What sort of object does proud illiteracy want not to signify? What does it at once recognize and pretend not to know, or know but pretend not to regard with importance?

Pride is a strange affect. From the Lacanian point of view, it is a variation on, because it is a defense against, the one primary affect: anxiety. At its simplest, anxiety is the experience, the sense, of an overwhelming proximity to one's real object of desire. In other words, anxiety is the ego's recoil from this impossible object, this object in the real, which, however fantasmatic, threatens to undo the ego's fragile assumption that its known reality, its sense of self and place in the world—its consciousness—is all there is and all there could be. While the object lures the subject beyond these limits, beyond reality, anxiety says *Go no further!* Where desire wants something more and something other than what consciousness can afford, anxiety says *This is it!* In this regard, pride is the terror of one's innate capacity to transgress the artificial, socially constructed, historically contingent, and always immanent limits of the self, transmuted into a pugnacious celebration of that very confinement. It is consciousness-raising as a form of aggression against the unconscious. It is extreme conservatism masked as radical self-assertion.

To be sure, pride has meanings and powers beyond only this, some of them emancipatory, others reactionary. And it bears repeating that psychoanalysis itself is by no means immune to pride. But by positioning her critique against that particular species of pride that innervates the illiteracy of desire, Copjec reminds us that a contrary literacy is an extended exercise in humility, or what she elsewhere theorizes under the heading of shame.[10] Asking us "to become literate in desire, to learn how to read what is inarticulable in cultural statements," she invites us to think beyond the pleasures of surety, mastery, or certainty, where we will have to invent new ways of being alone and together, new critical strategies, cultural constructs, and theoretical reflections that insist, with all due humility and not a little shame, upon our universal irreducibility, as subjects of desire, to history in all its forms.[11]

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10 See Joan Copjec, "May '68, The Emotional Month," in *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2006), 90–113.

11 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 14.

Both within and against "history in all its forms," the contributors to this issue of *Filozofski Vestnik* follow Copjec in aligning ourselves with the *not-all* by which Lacan designated the feminine modality of desire in the logic of sexual difference. Whereas the masculine modality treats language like a hammer with which to nail sense into place, to say it all, the not-all is there where the hammer slips, embarrassing the One who wields it and damaging the constructions sense aims to secure. Or, again borrowing from Lacan, it is "what doesn't stop not being written."[12] By also limiting ourselves to Copjec's critique of historicism and the historicists, we hope to specify the action of the not-all not so much in history as such—an impossible task, to be sure—as in the conception of history that best characterizes the theoretical hegemony of the present.

In the remainder of this introduction, I will frame this specificity according to its own historical precedents, dwelling with the history of historicism and elaborating the details in Copjec's general critique so as to prepare our larger consideration of her book's currency today. Redrawing the prepositional "against" that falsely denotes a simple opposition between Lacan and the historicists—particularly Foucault, historicism's most important representative—will better enable us to see why the enduring illiteracy to which her book was originally addressed is a symptom, that is, a displaced repetition and inversion of a desire that was already within historicism from the beginning, a desire to read desire, itself waiting and wanting to be read. Finally, in order to situate the issue's remaining contributions with respect to a few of proud illiteracy's contemporary permutations, I consider *Read My Desire*'s fresh relevance in light of the subtle or dramatic cultural transformations separating us from the book's first appearance. Each of these original essays, we will find, revisits or reinvents moments in Copjec's text that dare us to read it again, and again, until words no longer fail.

What Historicism?

Times change. But read again and you will be struck by history's compulsion to repeat. The trouble begins, as trouble so often does, with youth in revolt.

The first lines of *Read My Desire* locate the cultural, political, and intellectual origins of historicism as Copjec will define it in the May, 1968 student protests in

[12] Lacan, *Encore*, 93–94 and 144–45.

Paris. Whatever else it might have been, this revolt, on her telling, was *against Lacan*. More precisely, it was his structuralism that attracted the students' censure. Structuralism preached the durability of a world that had grown unbearable and was a key armature of the accommodationist, statist system the young insurrectionists wanted to abolish. Emancipation would not come about through further examination of the minutiae of social structures, nor through their slow reform or patient dismantlement. What was needed and what the students demanded was decisive, direct action. As one anonymous dissident wrote on a blackboard at the Sorbonne, to no one in particular, "Structures do not march in the streets."[13]

It was out of this insurgence against structuralism that a new tendency to reduce every instance of revolt to its concrete immediacy emerged. At the forefront of this move toward total immanentization was André Glucksmann's notion of "the pleb." Originating in his 1977 book *The Master Thinkers,* the pleb named, in Copjec's words, "some pure instance of particularity that had the potential to undermine all the universalizing structures of power"—including the University itself, as well as the systems of thought that organized it and that it reproduced, structuralism foremost among them. Copjec continues: "any discourse that 'originated' with the pleb was thought to have a political value and correctness that was automatically foreclosed to discourses 'originating' with those in positions of power"—whatever their political orientations or stated ideologies, whatever the agendas to which their powers are applied.[14]

Copjec glosses this anecdote only because it so elegantly captures the essential difference between Lacan and Foucault to which the rest of the book gives detailed form. So, she swerves quickly to Foucault's more nuanced redeployment of the pleb, in which he distinguishes the myth of such an entity ("'The' pleb," Foucault says, "does not exist") from a certain point of view at the outer limit of the network of power relations constituting a given social order, a viewpoint he calls "plebness."[15] Unlike Glucksmann, Foucault rightly emphasizes that nobody is outside of power, that no discourse is "original" to either the powerful or the powerless, and that the pleb is at best a useful fiction. Yet—and this is the

13 Quoted in Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 1.

14 Copjec, 1–2.

15 Quoted in Copjec, 2.

nuance Copjec underlines—Foucault insists that "something" (his term), some irreducible 'dot dot dot,' "in some way" escapes determination from within any web of power relations and will not be circumscribed by the conditions of possibility that want totally to contain it.[16] Even if he is unwilling to name this ineffable, immanent "something," we can already recognize its resonances, if not quite its identity, with Copjec's articulation of desire. So, rather than posing an essential obstacle to the literacy of desire, Copjec argues it is Foucault's own forgetting this remainder that has enabled desire's effacement by the so-called Foucauldians in his moment and by the historicism of today. This is a first tension internal to the history of historicism that deserves ratcheting up as we consider the symptomatic dimension of its proud illiteracy.

A second, more obscure tension, one that Copjec passes over here but to which she returns more or less implicitly in the following chapters, is that many members of the coterie of professors of illiteracy to which Glucksmann belongs and of which he is but one especially lucent firebrand were not acolytes of Foucault. They aligned themselves emphatically *with Lacan*. These were the *Nouvelle Philosophes*, upstart public intellectuals at the vanguard of the New Left in France whose prime target was not psychoanalysis, certainly not Lacan, but Marxism and the *Parti communiste français*. Against the Party's centralization of leftist struggle, its collaboration with the labor unions, its investment in electoral democracy, and its emphasis on the remediation of exploitation, the *Nouvelle Philosophie* reproved Party and State in favor of the unthought, unthinkable, uncalculated, incalculable potential of *the people*, whoever they may be—the people in or as revolt, beyond every institutional configuration, beyond the dictatorship of the proletariat, beyond any unifying, universalizing historicity. This is the essence of Glucksmann's conception of the pleb, but it is quite as true of the self-described Lacanians, for whom the illegible and unstoppable engine of the people's revolt was what (they thought) Lacan called desire.[17] In both cases,

[16] "The 'pleb,'" Foucault explains, "undoubtedly has no sociological reality. But there is indeed always something which in some way escapes the relations of power; something in the social body, which is [. . .] that which escapes." Quoted in Copjec, 2. Copjec summarizes: "The resistance offered by the pleb does not come from some external point but is instead the very limit of the system of power, and as such not absorbable by it." Copjec, 3.

[17] Two examples will suffice. Jean-Paul Dollé's 1975 book *Le désir de revolution* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1975) uses Lacan's critique of science and truth to advance a nominally Maoist conception of desire as the unintelligible wellspring of autonomous individualism, arguing

the complex interrelations between history and its uncountable excess are flattened into a simple opposition.

Although this other, Lacanian side of the story nowhere appears in *Read My Desire*, it is detailed in the text to which Copjec refers us in the book's first footnote, Peter Dews' 1979 essay, "The *Nouvelle Philosophie* and Foucault." Here is Copjec's note in full: "This essay is an excellent account of Foucault's theoretical relation to the events of May 1968 and the reactions to them."[18] So it is. But more than this, it is a stridently, even vituperatively critical summation of the whole *Nouvelle Philosophie*; a careful reading of Foucault that laments his susceptibility to the *Nouveaux Philosophes* irrationalist seductions; and, in a striking asymmetry, a hasty dismissal of Lacan that hands him over to the *Nouveaux Philosophes* and their solipsistic anti-politics with barely a shrug. So, for Dews, all of them together—Lacan and the Lacanians, Foucault and the Foucauldians—are the vanguard of an emergent rhetoric of vague moral purisms and simplistic dichotomies that abdicates viable political strategy and strategic organization for vacuous appeals to revolt without results.[19]

Needless to say, this assessment is not at all disinterested. The crux of Dews' complaint is the catastrophe the *Nouveaux Philosophes* represented for Marxism in France and for any science of history aiming to articulate the economic

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that any effort to read desire into history is a recuperative, counter-revolutionary imposition. Guy Ladreau and Christian Jambet's *L'Ange: Pour une cynégétique du semblant* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1976), which caused a stir when it was published in 1976 but has since been forgotten, attempts a synthesis of Mao and Lacan in order to articulate an almost-millenarian ontology of revolution. For a partial translation of passages from *L'Ange* and a historical and critical commentary, see Anthony Paul Smith, "The Speculative Angel," in *Speculative Medievalisms: Discography*, ed. The Petropunk Collective (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum, 2013), 45–64.

18 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 237n1.

19 See note 17 above. According to Dews, Glucksmann's quasi-Foucauldian anti-institutionalism leads to "absurd conclusions," including that literacy is statist oppression, and that "there is no such thing as Capital since [. . .] there are only different individual capitals." Peter Dews, "The Nouveau Philosophie and Foucault," *Economy and Society* 8, no. 2 (May 1979): 138; with Dollé, an "absolute dichotomy is supposed between rebellion and recuperation, which entails that only the immediacy of revolt, the 'coincidence of politics and life,' offers an escape from the cycle of oppression," even though (or just because), with such high-minded ideals, results simply do not matter (132); and Ladreau and Jambet are "the most fanatical embodiment" of this simplistic absolutism (156).

logic of systematic exploitation, let alone any consolidated counter-strategy.[20] Of Lacan, he writes:

> In general relations between the *Nouveaux Philosophes* and the leading philosophers of the previous generation [Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard, Althusser] have been less than amiable [. . .]. The two great exceptions to this hostility are Lacan and Foucault. There is nothing mysterious about this in the case of Lacan, who has never claimed to be a Marxist, who expressed no sympathy for post-'68 *gauchisme*, and who has explicitly mocked the idea of 'sexual liberation' in the name of a very traditional Freudian pessimism. Since 1970, with the development of the theory of the 'four discourses' (among them the 'discourse of the master', cornerstone of the *Nouvelle Philosophie*) Lacanism has taken an explicitly anti-Marxist turn.[21]

This sort of caricature has been thoroughly debunked elsewhere.[22] And while she does not address the Marxist complaint directly, Copjec's far more patient and sophisticated reading of Lacan is rejoinder enough. For our purposes, this other side of the fallout from 1968 warns us that Lacan should not be reduced

[20] This sort of critique is a precedent to the recent trend of holding Foucault almost personally responsible for the collapse of any viable leftism after the 1970s, the ensuing global hegemony of neoliberalism, and the pathological narcissism that has taken hold of what used to be political speech. See, for instance, Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora, "Today, the Self is the Battlefield of Politics. Blame Michel Foucault," *The Guardian*, June 15, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jun/15/michel-foucault-self-individual-politics. A more sophisticated, if still unconvincing, reading of Foucault's susceptibility to the temptations of neoliberalism is Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora, *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2021), with which I have quarreled at length elsewhere; see my "*Epistème la gris*: Foucault and Psychedelic Neoliberalism," *Continental Thought and Theory* 3, no. 4 (2022): 230–59, https://ctt.canterbury.ac.nz/issues/vol-3-issue-4-foucaults-method-today/. For a detailed reading of Foucault's engagement with Glucksmann and the context for their joint attack on Marxism in France, see Michael Scott Christofferson, "Foucault and New Philosophy: Why Foucault Endorsed André Glucksmann's *The Master Thinkers*," in *Foucault and Neoliberalism*, ed. Daniel Zamora and Michael C. Behrent (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2016), 6–23.

[21] Dews, "*Nouveau Philosophie*," 139.

[22] See, for example, two recent volumes of original essays: Adrian Johnston, Boštjan Nedoh, and Alenka Zupančič, eds., *Objective Fictions: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, Marxism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021); and Christina Soto van der Plas et al., eds., *The Marx Through Lacan Vocabulary: A Compass for Libidinal and Political Economies* (London: Routledge, 2022).

to the "Lacanism" parading under the banner of a desire it refuses to read any more than Foucault should be reduced to Glucksmann.

What does this all mean for us, today? It means, first, that just as we should refuse the misreading according to which neither Lacan nor Foucault have anything to offer Marxism other than new enemies on the horizon, we should refuse the sort of academic territorialism that sequesters historicism from psychoanalysis as if they must be enemies to one another. We should also refuse any misreading that assimilates Lacan into Foucault or vice-versa, thereby nullifying the important discrepancies between them. Unlike the debates through which the *Nouvelle Philosophie* articulated itself in the 1970s, this sort of territorialism, segregation, and intellectual imperialism—all this selective and proud illiteracy—probably is not so much a matter of doctrinaire allegiances as it is a force of habit. Against this—and with Copjec, whose whole book performs the alternative—we should instead hold to the possibility of a meaningful relation, thus also an essential difference and incurable non-relation, between historicism and psychoanalysis. We should insist upon the prepositional weight of this *between* that at once separates and conjoins them both because, as we have just seen, psychoanalysis is already implicated in the history of historicism, and because historicism's animating concern for the irreducible is the very cause of psychoanalysis.

One more word on this prepositional logic. To be *between* Lacan and Foucault, desire and its history, psychoanalysis and historicism, is a variation on being *against*. Copjec's subtitle, *Lacan Against the Historicists*, surely strikes a note of defiance, as when one stands against a gang of adversaries, or defensiveness, as when one is up against a wall; but "against" also implies contact or connection, as in the intimacy of being pressed against an other whose touch sensibilizes one to one's own limit; or a contrast that more finely draws the differences between objects in relation, such as that of a cloud against a blue sky; or a comparison, like options weighed against one another. Patiently read, a literacy of desire invokes all these meanings. Throughout her book, Copjec draws the two sides of the opposition, Lacan and the historicists, into an infinitesimal proximity which, like all infinitesimals, yet remains an infinite distance. The infinite within the infinitesimal: This is the at once vast and minute space of desire and its legibility.

Even if the riotous students in 1968 were "against" Lacan in the sense of a simple opposition, the ensuing history should lead us to wonder whether that opposition might be re-read, resignified, according to this more expansive conception of againstness. If so, then psychoanalysis more than had something to say *to* the uprising; it had, has, will have something to learn from it. Psychoanalysis may yet learn something of its own unread or misread radicalism from the history and ongoing realities of youth in revolt.

To frame the problem in this way is already a Foucauldian gesture, as it treats May 1968 not as a fossilized archive but as an constituent component in the intellectual and political history of the present. And it is a Lacanian gesture, since it positions the past as a relay through which to read our own moment—not in its explicit commitments and contradictions, but, again, in its negativity, tracking that which prevails throughout discourse, frames and organizes it, but cannot be located at the level of the statement: that excess of desire, that "something" which is in history more than historicism, and in historicism more than itself.

Kids These Days

Once again.

Paris, 1968. Graffiti and posters proliferate along the city walls. "Politics happens in the streets." "No replastering, the structure is rotten." "Workers of the world, enjoy!"[23] An unknown scribe, tired of being told by the proud professors of structuralism what is an is not possible, done with being told to read more and desire less, scrawls upon a blackboard at the Sorbonne, "Structures do not march in the streets."

But structures do march in the streets. This was what Lacan set out to demonstrate throughout his seminar the following year, wherein he turned psychoanalysis upside-down and inside-out (*à l'envers*) with his account of the four

[23] "Slogans of 68," https://libcom.org/article/slogans-68; my translations. For dozens of other examples, see *Situationist International Anthology, Revised and Expanded Edition*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006): 445–57.

discourses.[24] After all, subjects march in the streets, and what is a structure without a subject? Or what is a subject without a structure?

The most instructive, and notorious, moment in Lacan's rejoinder came not during the seminar proper, but during his visit late in 1969 to the new Experimental University of Vincennes. The story is well known. Under Foucault's leadership in cooperation with Serge Leclaire, the university has just founded the nation's first Department of Psychoanalysis with an explicitly Lacanian orientation. A rowdy group of young provocateurs have occupied the lecture hall and are tearing into Lacan as an exemplar of the Establishment. With growing exasperation, Lacan asks or dares the crowd to consider the motive forces driving their enthusiasm, culminating in his (in)famous admonishment: "What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master. You will get one."[25] The gathering breaks up shortly afterward.

To see how this anecdote can help position psychoanalysis today, we have to distinguish Lacan's reproach from the sort of generalized hand-wringing about "kids these days [. . .]" that, as ever, offers more obscurity than insight and operates in service to repression and disavowal.[26] Too often, among his detractors quite as frequently as his adherents, whether applied to the situation in 1968 or to any other moment of rebellion, Lacan's "What you aspire to [. . .]" is painted as a knowing cynicism; it is as if, to parody the title of an early book by Slavoj Žižek, "They know not what they do," while the Lacanians peer into the crystal ball of the four discourses and pronounce, "But *we* know what they do."[27] With Copjec, though, and against pride, we should insist that psychoanalysis

[24] Despite the emphasis Lacan brings to this point beginning in 1969, it is fundamental to his engagement with the psychoanalysis of culture at least since 1938; see Adrian Johnston, "Lacanian Theory Has Legs: Structures Marching in the Streets," *South Atlantic Review* 72, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 99–105.

[25] Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 207.

[26] On the psychoanalytic history of this brand of repression, centered in New York rather than Paris, see Hannah Proctor, "A Common Craziness: Diagnosing Youth Revolt at the Columbia 1968 Uprisings," *Parapraxis* 6, https://www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/a-common-craziness. An excellent take on how campus protest movements are made into fantasy objects within the cultural matrix of social-sexual reproduction is Samuel Catlin, "The Campus Does Not Exist," *Parapraxis* 4, https://www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/the-campus-does-not-exist.

[27] Though not useful to the present discussion, the reference here is Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (New York: Verso, 1991).

is not a presumed expertise issuing from a subject-supposed-to-know. It cannot be often enough repeated that psychoanalysis is not in the business of explanation. Nor is it in the business of prescription, political or otherwise. It does not pathologize, remonstrate with, or aim to correct a supposed deviance. It does not wag the finger. Psychoanalytic interpretation, like youth in revolt, is a rejoinder against the closure of sense and the sureties of established understanding. It is a means of amplifying what does not fit within the observable, articulable parameters of a historically specific situation. Doing so, it hopes to reveal the situation's arbitrariness and incompleteness, as well as the anxiety for totality that holds it in place and compels its reproduction. This is a hope without guarantee, which is why it hangs on an ethics of desire rather than the promise of a happy, or even a curative, outcome.

With this ethical commitment to unknowing in mind, consider now one particular iteration of the protesters' impatience with Lacan at Vincennes: "If we think," a student shouts to laughter and applause, "that it's by listening to the discourse of Lacan, Foucault [. . .] or anyone else that we'll be able to criticize the ideology that they're making us swallow, we're looking up our own asses. I say that we have to look outside for the means to overthrow the University." In reply, Lacan by no means defends the University or its discourse, nor does he argue with the student's accusation of academic auto-proctoscopy (if anything, he might push the accusation further to include the University's auto-coprophagia).[28] Instead, Lacan asks, with genuine puzzlement, "But outside of what?"[29] However sincerely felt, the students' commitment to revolution could only be uttered in the language—thus according to the structure—of the society it wants to overthrow, including especially the discourse of the University. Leave the University, Lacan says, and you will yet carry it with you out into the street. From where, then, would you accomplish such an "overthrow," and what would come of it other than flipping the University on its head? Or, as it were, on its feet, where, restored to the position of the Master, it could march along imagining its absolute coincidence with the reality it produces and demanding fealty without limit.

[28] The University's coprophagia was already colorfully depicted in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*; see Part III, Chapter 5 on the academy of Lagado (New York: Penguin, 2003), 167–73.

[29] Jacques Lacan, "Impromptu at Vincennes," trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, *October* 40 (Spring, 1987): 124–25; here I prefer the more colorful language of Mehlman's translation to Grigg's translation in Lacan, *Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 205.

The students may not have wanted to hear it, but this is not a conservative or counter-revolutionary position. Needless to say, it is not a progressive position, either. Nor is it a hysterical provocation that aims only to reveal the implicit impotence in every effort of mastery. It is, rather, an instance of the analyst's discourse, the function of which is to open some daylight between a subject and the reality in which the subject is entrapped, the better to see how one's desire is entwined with the very formations one would like to escape or destroy, as well as how one enjoys one's torment and bears some responsibility for its perpetuation.

This is why a literacy of desire is a way of reading what is *not there* in structure yet does not exist without it. A repressed desire or a disavowed enjoyment are the ghosts in the machine, the bit of the real that the whole structure, psychical or social, is built to efface and that keep the whole system going. Rather than a simple absence, it is a generative negativity. It is only by reading it, by reading the reviled structure's dependence upon it, that some more expansive responsibility for its operations becomes possible and some shift in the structure, for better or worse, may occur. This reading is not a spectacular rupture, and it is not amenable to the society of the spectacle; it is a slow, patient, often tedious or agonizing, prying at and prying apart. One pries at the structure because by doing so one can discover—or invent—its vulnerabilities to transformation. Structures cannot be set down, exited, or overthrown by simple force of (conscious) will, no matter how rotten and unpleasant they have become. To imagine otherwise, Lacan suggests, is to be entrapped by the very illusion of liberation.

Here, we again find ourselves at an infinitesimal—so, still infinite—remove from Foucault. The illusion of liberation is precisely the temptation Foucault's celebrated theory of power, the hinge of the historicist turn toward the immanent play of micropolitics, is built to dispel. Power is not a property or capacity; there is no "outside" of power, and power is not synonymous with repression. Power is the situational, multivalent, omnipresent, immanent field of force relations through which subjects are produced and in which they contest, resist, or transform the conditions of their production. The network of power is ubiquitous; nothing escapes. If there is a single, unifying *a priori* among the variety of critical approaches Copjec groups under the heading of historicism, surely it is this.

And yet, power's immanentization according to which escape is impossible seems to authorize the same voluntaristic conception of the social link against

which Lacan warned the students at Vincennes. How so? Because if power is everywhere, Foucault's reasoning goes, then so is resistance. Situations may be upended and reversed. Foucault even hedges on the possibility of revolution. So, nearly a decade after the events of 1968, he writes:

> Are there no great radical ruptures, massive binary divisions, then? Occasionally, yes [. . .]. Just as the network of power relations ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localized in them, so too the swarm of points of resistance traverses social stratifications and individual unities. And it is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible, somewhat similar to the way in which the state relies on the institutional integration of power relationships.[30]

The concrete political question to which Foucault and Foucauldians have trouble responding is whether "strategic codification" occurs purely by chance or whether the unlocalized swarm of resistances requires some organizing principle, some shared cause or objective, around which (the possibility of) a revolution may coalesce. Is strategic codification always an accident of history, and if so, can it only be recognized as revolutionary or reactionary after the fact? And by whom is it thus recognized? What even is strategy, if not forethought or calculation? Beyond the matter of organization and strategic directive, to what extent is revolution "somewhat similar" to the state, with its bureaucratic and intrinsically conservative organizational structure? Whither the (partial?) symmetry? Or, is every revolution only a state in formation?

From the Marxist angle, these questions answer themselves. That is, Foucault's account of strategy is incoherent navel-gazing; the politics it authorizes, as the New Left makes clear, is manifestly disastrous. Yet, modulating the Foucauldian position with Lacan's once again offers an alternative that realigns the question of the political without falling into solipsism and incoherence. The corrective, as we have already seen, is that while there is no outside of power there is an otherness internal to its operations that it can neither manipulate, produce, nor reduce—an immanent remainder that every effort of reduction only redoubles and remobilizes. In this view, determination does not mitigate indeterminacy, it

[30] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 96.

multiplies it. This, again, is the strange logic of the not-all, an intrinsic non-sense that at once fuels and frustrates every exercise of meaning. No resignification of desire will totally entrap us, but nor will resignification set us free. Every signification, Marxist, historicist, psychoanalytic, or otherwise, misses the mark.

What distinguishes psychoanalysis is that rather than designate the shared cause around which any swarm of resistances might coalesce, or set the standard by which to judge whether a given revolt is radical or reactionary, its organizing principle is that no structure, no discourse, and no swarm of resistances will ever quiet the subject's protest. To be a subject is to be stuck with an incurable desire: forever dissatisfied and *dissatisfied with this dissatisfaction*. No new thing, no definite aim, no alternative object, will ever subdue this existential rebellion. The subject is a problem without a solution. This is neither a theoretical *a priori* nor a historical artifact. It is a matter of fact out of which the whole of psychoanalytic experience, including the experience of reading, unfolds.

If we are to avoid collapsing this conception of the subject into that of the pleb, romanticizing revolt and vitiating its critique, the political question for psychoanalysis is twofold: What is to be done, in a particular, historically delimited situation, to widen the interstices of desire, to amplify rather than quell the subject's dissatisfaction? And what new forms of sociality can be created by prying desire away from the forms of capture that want instead to nullify it or to instrumentalize it in service to some abstract (transcendental) ideal, however liberatory it may seem? Or, again: What are we to do now, today, once more, with this immanent, insurrectionary otherness called desire? And what sort of "we" does it ask us to become?

These questions may seem generic but they are not abstract. They are variations on *Read My Desire*'s unifying political injunction, namely, to instigate "another logic of the superego": a new conception of dissatisfaction that is not predicated upon its submission to the order of the signifier, and an ethics of the not-all that does not outsource responsibility for desire and its discontents to some idealized Other who would be excepted from the dictates and constraints of the social bond.[31]

[31] "It is now time," Copjec writes, "to devote some thought to developing an ethics of inclusion or of the unlimited, that is, an ethics proper to the woman. Another logic of the

Recall that for Copjec May 1968 marks the shift after which revolt became an end in itself and the immediacy of one's felt experience was all the authority one required to claim the legitimacy of one's rebellion. In the book's original context, the mid-1990s, the pleb reappeared under headings such as "multiculturalism" and "political correctness"—at least until these terms were appropriated and mockingly redeployed from the right.[32] Now, multiculturalism is called "diversity, equity, and inclusion," and political correctness is "wokeness" or something like it, but their function remains the same. Ten years from now, these terms, too, will seem so quaint that I am already embarrassed to write them.

But, striking as history's compulsion to repeat is, times change. As of this writing, in 2025, we are not reliving 1968 and we are perhaps even further from 1994. The pleb now manifests variously, in all directions, throughout our increasingly Balkanized political encampments and not only from the (remnants of the) left. Now that the professors of proud illiteracy have been swallowed by the peddlers of immediacy in the global "race to the bottom of the brain stem," identitarian grievance kicks hard from all directions.[33] The felt experience of marginalization, regardless of its objectively measurable reality, induces radicalization in the very name of nostalgic revival. More and more rapidly, it seems, faster than any news cycle, the established tracks of ideological allegiance are scrambled and remixed as old commitments are collapsed into algorithmically generated, self-perpetuating client categories; political community shatters into the infinite reflective shards of bespoke political imaginaries; artificial intelligence generates real stupidity as even the most basic inquiry is farmed out to de-realized machines or reality as we knew it is de-realized, rendered deeply fakeable and therefore already fake, while the material costs of all this unreality are shunted beyond the far edge of our collective awareness.[34]

superego must commence" (*Read My Desire*, 236).

32 Copjec, 1.

33 The essential theorization of this recent history of "disintermediation" is Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy, or the Style of Too-Late Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2024). The phrase "race to the bottom of the brain stem" was coined by Tristan Harris, quoted in James Williams, *Stand out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 33.

34 A good account of the material consequences of the attention economy's conflation with generative artificial intelligence, including a useful literature review, is Jakko Kemper, "Generative AI, Everyday Aesthetic Production, and the Imperial Mode of Living," *Critical AI* 3, no. 1 (April 2025): https://doi.org/10.1215/2834703X-11700246.

All of this ripples through and reconfigures that old seat of complaint at which the students at Vincennes also took aim: the University, which proves itself utterly resistant to the same resistance it has incubated as it tears itself asunder pretending to represent the very ideals it so often betrays. What now?

Or, what else is new? The discourse of the University was never the gateway to salvation, and psychoanalysis was never at home there, anyway. This does not mean psychoanalysis has no place there. As Lacan's visit to Vincennes makes clear, psychoanalysis can disturb the University on its own grounds, even if it offers no easy escape. It can do so by inviting the denizens of the University—not so much its administrators and trustees but the youth in revolt to whom the future truly belongs—to become literate in desire. Such an invitation cannot be another commandment. It will have to take a more curious form: that of *listening*, as psychoanalysis has always endeavored to do, for what otherwise has no home in speech: the not-all intrinsic to every attempt at making sense and nailing it to the wall, including our students' efforts to make sense of a vile and unjust world in their entirely reasonable desperation to change it. The invitation involves lending an ear to what the kids these days already well know, even if we prefer not to know much about it. This, finally, is what *Read My Desire* teaches. Listening more and speaking less, listening for the unspoken or the unspeakable, for resistance *à l'envers*, for the angst, anguish, and anxiety that only too rightly wants its hearing.

So, let us once again follow Copjec's lead and withhold our pretensions to know and our temptation to explain. A little more humility, a little less pride, is in order if we are to read the constellation of desire traversing and exploding the regimes of truth and categories of understanding that had hitherto anchored our collective notions of what is possible, politically, intellectually, or otherwise. What we do know, because psychoanalysis no less than history confirms it again and again, is that a society that leaves no room for the insurrectionary force of the subject will know all about it soon enough. To read desire is to expand the range of the subject's action and its promise. If it does not expand, it will explode. Either you are with the not-all, or you are with the police. If that frightens you, you can be sure that the police will be there in any event. If it makes you anxious, then stick with it.

Still Writing

To read desire is to articulate what is constitutively, definitionally inarticulable within the symbolic parameters of the social link without thereby resorting to the ruse or fallacy of some determinate exteriority, some metalanguage. The historicist is correct: desire is not a metaphysical truth which, once restored to the social text, would complete it. And Lacan is correct: desire is already there in the text, an internal incompletion, inscribed right on the surface. "Some elision," Copjec writes, "or negation of its powers writes itself in language *as* the lack of metalanguage."[35] To read desire thus is to inhabit this lack, and in so doing to *compose* it by *reposing* and *transposing* it, giving form to the positive dimension of its negativity through the language it at once animates and defies.

It is under the sign of this lack that we submit this collection of new readings. Together, they do not cohere into a whole, an integral totality, without tension or internal differences. They do not constitute a metalanguage of *Read My Desire* any more than the book is the metalanguage for each and all of them. Every contribution is a surplus that overflows and incompletes Copjec's critical gesture. Particularly when these works contend with the same objects of interpretation—for example, Chris Marker's film *La Jetée*, or the strange twoness of sex, or the very notion of desire—you may find inconsistencies or outright contradictions in the contributors' analyses. This is as it should be, not only because Copjec's thought incites theoretical debate rather than happy consensus, but because her book's principal wager, and ours, as I have variously repeated throughout this introduction, is that desire renders language—thus also the thought that language pretends to organize—hopelessly different to itself. To read desire is to read this difference and, doing so, to elaborate it without telos or guarantee. This is the work of the negative, its generativity, which is never a matter of reproduction on the way to some ideal of sameness. To learn from Copjec is to follow her arguments; more importantly, however, it is to be inspired by the radical possibilities of reading a text, a film, a photograph, a cultural phenomenon, just where they break with the frames that enclose them

35 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 9; emphasis in original. Later, Copjec will clarify that the lack of metalanguage is not a lack *in* language, as if its "meta" were denied it by subtraction; it is, rather, a surplus *of* language, "the excess that language appears to cut off [. . .] that *causes* the subject" (53; emphasis in original).

and open onto a critical potentiality and an indeterminacy of meaning. It is to read for what resists and to amplify the resistance. At times, it is even to read against *Read My Desire*.

Our first redeployment of this radical strategy of reading is James Penney's "Queer Phantom Critters." As Copjec does with Lacan and Foucault, Penney reminds us that psychoanalysis has long faced either outright hostility or, more perniciously but no less symptomatically, processes of assimilation that misread the Freudian discovery and its Lacanian iteration as slight variations on other, more dominant threads of critique. One unlikely inheritance of this particular hostility to the real—unlikely because at first blush the real seems entirely absorbed by it—is the late turn (back) to reality conceived as materiality independent of its cognition or symbolization. Penney attends to one especially instructive instance of this new materialist turn, Karen Barad's "agential realism." Redrawing Copjec's indictment of historicism's erasure of the subject in this new direction, Penney argues that agential realism's critique of science cannot account for the desire that ensures the scientific subject's (unconscious) commitment to a "particular ideological point of view." It cannot explain how this desire "gives rise to a set of intentional and unintentional impacts on experimental practice that shape both the environment and the human community that inhabits it."[36] More than this, he writes, Barad's "overhasty judgment of a generalized material indeterminacy—a determinate indeterminacy" refuses to consider "a variety of subjectivity that would impact scientific practice while remaining distinct from the self-present and self-centering 'Cartesian' humanist consciousness that it rightly wants to reject."[37] So, as with the perfectly enclosed web of power relations Foucault describes, the critique vitiates its own alternative and becomes redundant with the totality it describes. Without rejecting agential realism *tout court*, Penney asks whether the psychoanalytic conception of the subject may offer the key to a viable engagement with the non-human world that does not reproduce the tyranny of reason.

If Penney expands Copjec's corrective into new theoretical terrain, Fernanda Negrete takes us back to Copjec's interrogation of an anxiety endemic to

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36 James Penney, "Queer Phantom Critters: Varieties of Causality in Agential Realism and Psychoanalysis," *Filozofski Vestnik* 46, no. 2 (2025): 57.

37 Penney, 50.

historicism in order to evoke "the future in its truly unprecedented quality."[38] Whereas historicism aims to reduce desire to its historical-cultural coordinates as if, by thus interpreting it, to mitigate its effects, Negrete considers desire's interpretive inexhaustibility as the spring of its radically creative potential. Bringing Copjec into conversation with Willy Apollon's position that culture and civilization are built upon the censorship of the feminine, Negrete reads Freud's interpretation of the Dream of Irma's Injection and Marker's *La Jetée* on the way to the long artistic history of Woman's interwovenness with death in order to show how all of this indexes a creativity beyond the limits of culture. The stake here is an aesthetics of the subject in excess of what can be circumscribed by what is already known or, indeed, knowable within the parameters of any interpretation. In this way, Negrete reminds us that the feminine is not one more item to be catalogued in history's cabinet of curiosities, a woman is not an object, and psychoanalysis is not yet another technique and technology of interpretation. Psychoanalysis engages interpretation, from *The Interpretation of Dreams* onward, to push against and go beyond the trade in signifiers, toward the void in history from where a real future, a future of the real, might unfold. "It is difficult," she writes, "to imagine what lies beyond the void of the real as livable. But it is also only through this void that a genuine future can be explored."[39]

The very title of Negrete's article, "Breast and the Jetty," is an echo of Franz Schubert's celebrated "Death and the Maiden." From a different angle, "Death and the Maiden," both the *lied* and the string quartet, is the principal subject of Cindy Zeiher's contribution, which extends Copjec's literacy of desire to music, musicality, and musicology. This is indeed new territory for *Read My Desire*, yet it still involves tending to the gaps, disconnects, falterings, and failures in a domain of aesthetic expression that can be neither separated from nor reduced to its historicity or to the psychobiography of its author-composer. Pursuing this novel ground, Zeiher theorizes a "musical subjectivity" that gives form to an otherwise uncanny sensation of proximity to our own boundless desire.[40] Through this psychoanalytic reading of Schubert's struggle with death, which

[38] Fernanda Negrete, "Breast and the Jetty: On Traversing Anxiety," *Filozofski Vestnik* 46, no. 2 (2025): 73.

[39] Negrete, 73.

[40] Cindy Zeiher, "Schubert's *mise-en-abîme*: Reading Copjec's Literacy of Desire as One Already Spoken For," *Filozofski Vestnik* 46, no. 2 (2025): 175.

Zeiher calls "ultimate castration," she implies that the composer has unlocked, without quite knowing it, a universal truth of desire *as such*.[41] Including and exceeding his own singular fantasy, Schubert's desire expresses this universality for his audience, his performers, and himself—provided, that is, we learn how to read him, even or especially where he is most resistant to the same truth he discloses.

Reading desire in music, tracking its operations in the signals of anxiety that ripple through Schubert's compositions, broadens the field of legible objects. Russell Sbriglia broadens it still further, and in a dramatically different direction, toward the troubling domain of white supremacist jingoism, racist hatred, and Islamophobia after September 11. From the beautiful, then, to the grotesque. To begin, Sbriglia draws from the surprising connection Copjec tracks between utilitarianism and perversion, as both are oriented by the pleasure principle against the unruly, incalculable, insurgent, and death-driven dimension of desire. As with the Clérambault photographs with which Copjec and Sbriglia illustrate this pairing, desire is posed here as a palimpsest, overwritten by the strategies of disavowal that at once mark and obscure it. For Sbriglia, Copjec's notion of the "sartorial superego" explains how this disavowal of one's own otherness recoils upon the racist subject as a hateful imperative to destroy the racialized other.[42] Thus does anti-Muslim violence, even to the point of the racist's suicidal self-sacrifice, operate a perverse aggression in service to patriotic and nationalist ideals. What is being destroyed in these awful acts of violence, but what creeps into view through their perpetrators' vitriolic rhetoric, is nothing other than the violent subject's own desire, manifested in their eyes as what the veil, the kaffiyah, or any other mark of an external otherness covers over and conceals as if securing there an enjoyment without limit. This is not nationalism run amok; it is nationalism running to its logical conclusion.

The political implications of this fantasy of the Other's unlimited enjoyment are given a different spin in J. Asher Godley's "The Subject Supposed to Vote: Teflon Totemism and Democracy's Bad Timing." This is an already overdue update on Copjec's analysis of Ronald Reagan and his "Teflon" presidency following

41 Zeiher, 171.

42 Russell Sbriglia, "Minus One, or the Mismeasure of Man: Sartorial Superegoism and the Ethics of Unruliness," *Filozofski Vestnik* 46, no. 2 (2025): 120.

Donald Trump's second election in 2024—overdue, because it could well apply to the electoral situation in which Trump was first elected in 2016, only now it is impossible for voters and media pundits to pretend ignorance regarding the sort of president he would be. Copjec's initial critique took media coverage of Reagan to task for its "imbecilic devotion" to facts and truth, whereas it was precisely Reagan's flouting of the facts, his declining to be constrained by reality and truth, that endeared him to his voters and so flummoxed his detractors.[43] Rather than simply note the stark repetition here, Godley swerves instead toward Lacan's account of *logical time*, the structure of that which endures at once within and beyond all historical contingencies. Here, Godley discovers the lasting power of those unwritten yet pervasive fantasies to which figures like Reagan and Trump give rise, not despite but because of their mendacity and ridiculousness. In place of the mediatic obsession with the candidate himself—a topic about which, surely, we have had more than enough hot takes and think-pieces—Godley offers the mythical figure of the "swing voter" as the crux of the fantasy keeping voters across the political spectrum in thrall to the hysterical logic Copjec diagnosed three decades ago.[44]

All of the above attend to the libidinal and fantastmatic dimensions of contemporary civilization (such as it is) and its many discontents. Our last three articles foreground the fully sexual aspect of desire by revisiting "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason," Copjec's unsurpassed intervention into the relation and non-relation between gender multiplicity and sexual difference. For Copjec, this exercise of reading Lacan through Kant's antinomies of reason was meant to show why psychoanalysis does not and cannot presume a biologically determined, rigid sexual binary, as if sex were a positive attribute of a subject that could be declined, denied, or otherwise deranged. Sex, in other words, is not the subject's assignation to one or another category of being, but the point of the subject's internal division, indetermination, and incompleteness. Just as Kant's antinomies of reason demonstrated a failure internal to reason, by which reason will forever be in default of a knowledge of the totality of "the world," sexual difference characterizes two modalities of our failure ever to know the totality of the subject.

43 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 143.

44 J. Asher Godley, "The Subject Supposed to Vote: Teflon Totemism and Democracy's Bad Timing," *Filozofski Vestnik* 46, no. 2 (2025): 151.

Roland Végső is primarily concerned with this subtractive dimension of the subject, which, even before the politics of sex and sexual identity, decommissions the concept of "the world" in which such a politics might unfold. "In this sense," he suggests, "psychoanalysis already comes after the end of the world."[45] On his reading of Copjec with Freud, sex is more than genderless; it is *worldless*. Végső extends his earlier work on *Worldlessness after Heidegger* to wonder what remains for the subject now that the world has ceased to exist even as a viable philosophical category while, against all reason, something like a desire for the world persists.[46] Here at the outer edge of our catastrophized modernity, still under the shadow of the twentieth century's worst atrocities (brilliantly figured, in Végső's article, by Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*), are we fated to retreat into a "reenchantment" of the world, and to wish hopelessly for a harmonious totality that was always already a logical impossibility? In Copjec, Végső finds not so much an answer as an emergent ethics of worldlessness. Her insistence on the real of sex against its total immanentization offers a pattern from which to develop a new opposition: not Lacan against the historicists, but Lacan against *the cosmologists*, among whom Végső includes Kant himself where he was unable to remain true to his own conclusions. "The promise of this new ethics," Végső writes, "is not that 'another world is possible' [. . .] but something more sinister and more promising at the same time: Something other than a world is possible."[47] As with the future of the feminine toward which Negrete gestures, what this "something other" might be remains an open question.

Turning now to another philosophical confrontation with sexual difference, A. Kiarina Kordela discovers in Copjec a logic more Spinozian than Kantian, and one that might overturn at least the terminology of Copjec's initial argument. In the first place, Kordela asserts, since sexual difference is a *real* difference, a difference in or of the real, it does not have the quality of a negative differentiation. Sex does not follow an oppositional logic according to which the two halves of the opposition would be defined by their exclusivity with respect to one another. It is, rather, a positive difference between singular eternal essence

45 Roland Végső, "On the Absolute Impossibility of the World's Existence: Lacan Against the Cosmologists," *Filozofski Vestnik* 46, no. 2 (2025): 102.

46 Roland Végső, *Worldlessness after Heidegger: Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, Deconstruction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

47 Végső, "On the Absolute Impossibility of the World's Existence," 108.

and the substance which is this singularity's actual, finite, and (only apparently) contingent existence. Paraphrasing Pierre Macherey, Kordela writes of these apparent contingencies, "Their existence is determined according to a negative determination, whereas their essence is determined according to a positive determination—while the two are expressions of one and the same thing."[48] This oneness and sameness are the basis of a Spinozian monadology Kordela has developed elsewhere.[49] Here, she incorporates Copjec's dispute particularly with the doctrine of gender performativity into this monadology, buttressing Copjec's original insistence that gender is a consequence of sexual difference, not its refutation. The infinite proliferation of sexualities and sexual identities is not at all inconsistent with the real of sexual difference since "any number, including infinity, is already a concession to the imaginary," unless it is a singular manifestation of the real.[50]

For Kordela, the political stakes of this maneuver are radical. It means sexuality is never a settled property of one's being, to which one clings in a basically tyrannical way even if only to demand the Other's recognition. Borrowing Spinoza's notion of *conatus*, sexuality is a *struggle* or a *striving*. "Sexual *conatus*," she writes, "is constitutive of one's being; it is the struggle to persevere *in my own singular being*, as opposed to any mold into which the symbolic order [. . .] may attempt to contain me."[51] Now, a question to which this directs us, but that Kordela does not yet make explicit, is this: What does such emphasis on singularity against identity mean for the *politics* of gender and sexuality thirty years after "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason," in our era of increasingly hyperbolic heteronormative reactionism, transphobia, and their attendant real and representational violences? What does singularity spell for the question of *sociality* in this context? If Kordela is right about the absolute commonality of ontological singularity where sex is concerned, what does this mean for those singularities whose sexual *conatus* places them in greater danger—in every sense of that word—than others? When might identity and its symbolization be matters of practical or ethical necessity, of life and death?

48 A. Kiarina Kordela, "Euthanasia of Freedom and Sexual *Conatus*," *Filozofski Vestnik* 46, no. 2 (2025): 196.

49 A. Kiarina Kordela, *Epistemontology in Spinoza-Marx-Freud-Lacan: The (Bio)Power of Structure* (London: Routledge, 2018).

50 Kordela, "Euthanasia of Freedom," 199.

51 Kordela, 200.

These are a few of the questions to which Ryan A. Hatch directs us in his incisive critique of psychoanalysis's abject failure to live up to its own radicalism in this regard. Too often, he notes with searing precision, psychoanalysis, at least in many of its most powerful institutional configurations, has sided with the voices of gender reactionism. In this, psychoanalysis has maintained its own proud illiteracy and has been part of the terrorism and tyranny of desire it was always supposed to subvert. In other words, psychoanalysis itself has failed to read and heed Copjec's critique, which never aimed to invalidate the multiplicity of sex but rather situated this multiplicity on more philosophically and ethically incontestable ground.

This last, nuanced point is crucial. As Hatch makes clear through his reconstruction of the last thirty years of queer critique and the impasses that continue to dog the field, Copjec's position is that sexual difference names neither the two halves of an immutable essence to which gender normativity can be anchored nor a stable bedrock against which gender fluidity ought to be opposed. To hold the contrary is to misunderstand or misuse "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason" for either side of a forced polemic. On one side, Copjec is called upon to legitimize a lazy and preposterous binarism that was never her position; on the other, she is made into an example of this binarism and thereby grouped among the same professors of proud illiteracy she has done so much to decry. Threading the needle, Hatch reclaims Copjec from either side to remind us that it is precisely sex's *inessentiality*, its uncountability or incalculability, that defies both biological-materialist reductionism and sex's surrender entirely to the play of significations as if it were some kind of language game. Against all this, Hatch writes, Copjec "insists on sex as definitively *not in service of*"—not for use, not for sale, not by any moral imperative or political agenda that would make sex good for something.[52] Sex is good for nothing.

In retrieving Copjec's argument from both her critics and her false friends, Hatch's argument is a tactical replication of her original intervention. Each chapter in Copjec's book is a variation on a double-movement: first, she rescues psychoanalysis from the misreading according to which it is paradigmatic of the apparatuses of power-knowledge that produce a subject already constrained by law; then, she rescues Lacan from his absorption into the

[52] Ryan A. Hatch, "Sex: Trouble," *Filozofski Vestnik* 46, no. 2 (2025): 223.

Foucauldian paradigm. The good-for-nothing subject of the unconscious, the subject of desire, is uncountable by the apparatuses of power-knowledge, unaccountable before any law that would circumscribe its being in advance of its becoming, unpredicated and unpredictable. This is the cause of psychoanalysis, that which compels it and for which it stands in its ongoing struggle against its own misreading and misinterpretation. It is also the cause of historicist critique, that surplus or excess of history, that *something* Foucault sought at the outer limit of the operations of power that denied its pretensions to total control. Reading it, writing it, this subject still does not stop not being written. And in this, it does not stop asking to be read and read again.

As the title to the last entry in this special issue of *Filozofski Vestnik* informs us, Copjec herself is "Still Reading." In this ranging interview, she reflects upon her initial motivations for taking on historicism; recalls why psychoanalysis and its approach to sexuality proved so invaluable to her early film studies; and considers where this work needs to be done again and anew today. She looks askance at some of the contemporary political and social issues that her book seems to have predicted and reframes proud illiteracy in terms of an "agnostic, I-do-not-want-to-know-anything-about-it reflex" that the cinematic evocation of the uncanny can help neutralize. And she does all this, as ever, with an eye toward the future, for herself, for psychoanalysis, and for culture, in light of the upheavals that will continue to scramble the old coordinates with which theory has tried to navigate the unstable terrain of our desire.

Reading and re-reading *Read My Desire* again, each of these essays makes clear the many ways in which Copjec both practices and induces an ethics of psychoanalysis in extension, beyond the scene of the clinic and the particularities of the individual psyche. More than the mere "application" of psychoanalysis, Copjec exercises a habit of suspicion that casts its lot among thinkers who want political and theoretical radicalism but fall short, sometimes disastrously so. In these opening pages, I have tried above all to insist that this stubborn suspicion is the best and only way toward a solicitude for the existentially unruly subject of desire without which history is a closed circuit and resistance is merely the dream of power. With each new contribution, we repeat the movement she initiated, placing ourselves once again with Lacan and against the historicists, with Copjec against the many proud illiteracies that are sure to proliferate and grow more pugnacious in the years to come. Against, and also between:

as mediators and interlocutors, students and teachers still struggling to read, learning to write, yearning to think, and offering thanks, from the limits of love and knowledge.

Data availability statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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