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On the Absolute Impossibility of the World's Existence: Lacan Against the Cosmologists

Keywords
Joan Copjec, Immanuel Kant, Charlie Chaplin, Chris Marker, Sigmund Freud, sex, world, ethics of psychoanalysis

Abstract
This essay argues that the contemporary relevance of psychoanalysis and Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire* can be derived from Sigmund Freud's consistent rejection of the program of the "re-enchantment of the world." Facing the onslaught of technological modernity, many of Freud's contemporaries lamented the disenchantment of the world. Today, this tradition persists as a renewed desire for a shared or common world; we collectively mourn the loss of the world. But, in this context, Copjec's work raises a disturbing question: Can a sexed being have a world? In order to draw out some of the consequences of this question, I examine the role Immanuel Kant's philosophy plays in *Read My Desire* in two steps: First, I address the theoretical argument against the existence of the world and, second, I examine some of the practical consequences of this insight. By providing a parallel reading of Kant's reflections on the antinomies of cosmological ideas and Jacques Lacan's formulae of sexuation, Copjec effectively establishes the fact that "the world" and "sex" are mutually exclusive categories.

O absolutni nemožnosti obstoja sveta: Lacan proti kozmologom

Ključne besede
Joan Copjec, Immanuel Kant, Charlie Chaplin, Chris Marker, Sigmund Freud, spol, svet, etika psihoanalize

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Povzetek

Avtor v članku trdi, da lahko sodobni pomen psihoanalize in knjige Joan Copjec *Read My Desire* izpeljemo iz Freudovega doslednega zavračanja programa »za-čaranja sveta«. Številni Freudovi sodobniki so se, soočeni s silnim napadom tehnološke moderne, pritoževali nad odčaranjem sveta. Danes se ta tradicija nadaljuje kot obnovitev želje po svetu, ki si ga delimo, oziroma skupnem svetu: kolektivno žalujemo za izgubo sveta. A delo Joan Copjec v tem kontekstu zastavlja mučno vprašanje: ali ima seksuirano bitje lahko svet? Da bi izpeljal nekatere posledice tega vprašanja, avtor v dveh korakih preuči, kakšno vlogo igra filozofija Immanuela Kanta v knjigi *Read My Desire*: prvič, preuči teoretski argument proti obstoju sveta, in drugič, preuči nekatere praktične posledice tega uvida. Copjec skozi svoje vzporedno branje Kantovih refleksij o antinomijah kozmoloških idej in Lacanovih formul seksuacije učinkovito zagovarja dejstvo, da sta »svet« in »spol« medsebojno izključujoči kategoriji.

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One of the most memorable sequences of Charlie Chaplin's film *The Great Dictator*—which was released on October 31, 1940, a year after Freud's death—depicts the graceful yet comic ballet performed by one of the two characters played by Chaplin himself, Adenoid Hynkel (a character obviously modeled on Adolf Hitler).[1] The stark contrast between the "feminine" gentility of the dance and the sadistic political fantasy that it stages serves as the source of Chaplin's humorous political commentary. As the film suggests, before realizing itself as a brutal reality, violent global imperialism first germinated as a genteel and artful dream. Two moments of this sequence are especially noteworthy as they propose a specific theory of fascism: Its opening scene articulates what we could call Chaplin's take on the genesis of fascist desire, while its ending arguably provides a possible model for the destruction of this fascist desire.

It is striking that in Chaplin's film the imperialist idea of world-conquest was not simply already present in the dictator's mind: The desire for ruling the world had to be constructed through political machination. In fact, Hynkel's character is depicted as surprisingly naïve—an underachieving dictator who needs the devil's help to live up to the demands of his office. After receiving news of a

1 *The Great Dictator*, dir. Charlie Chaplin (United Artists, 1940).

strike at a factory led by people who all happened to be brunettes, Hynkel's minister, the character called Garbitsch (modeled on Joseph Goebbels), in a devilish performance, implants the idea in Hynkel's mind that the latter could become the "dictator of the world." This goal can be achieved through the extermination of all the brunettes so that a purely blond-haired society can be created. The irony of the situation does not escape the two characters. After all, neither of them is blond. Yet, Garbitsch turns out to be a master dialectician and explains that this apparent contradiction is actually the only logical solution to the problem of world conquest: as the only brunette left in the world, the blonds will worship Hynkel as a god. Hynkel's melodramatic response follows: "No, no! you mustn't say it. You make me afraid of myself."

Hynkel's famous ballet with a balloon painted like a globe ensues. He literally floats around in his office, tenderly dancing around with the globe whose weightlessness belies the gravity of the situation. The sequence ends abruptly when the balloon suddenly pops. At this point, an expression of childish frustration takes over Hynkel's face as he collapses on his desk crying inconsolably. Here the film seems to suggest that this popping of the balloon (subtracting the sublime object of desire) is a possible strategy for the undoing of fascist desire. The film explains quite clearly that the idea of the "world" as a political category, despite what its name might suggest, is not a tool of universal inclusion but precisely one of systematic exclusion. The existence of the world (as an object of desire) is predicated upon the extermination of those whose mere existence is construed as a threat to this world; and the excluded element haunts this pure world in the form of a sovereign exception. After the brutal extermination of all the undesirables, the dictator of the world will be the only brunette left in the world of blonds.

What happens when the balloon is popped and the world disappears? In what follows, I want to reflect on the consequences of this destruction or subtraction of the idea of the world from our theoretical and political discourses. In this sense, Chaplin's film could be historically contextualized by reference to the dominance of the discourse on the "disenchantment of the world" during the first half of the twentieth century. The actual formulation of this thesis is usually derived from Max Weber's analysis of the rationalization of production and social forms in the work of the decline of religion and the rise of science in modern society. In its broadest usage, however, the "disenchantment of the world" has

simply come to mean that, under the conditions of technological modernity, we have lost our relation to the organic and meaningful totality of life. Thus, the diagnosis of the "disenchantment of the world" has given rise to various attempts to "reenchant the world"—an obsession that is still with us today.

What sets psychoanalysis apart from these early twentieth-century discourses is Freud's consistent rejection of the program of this "reenchantment of the world." Apparently, both Chaplin and Freud saw that fascism (among other things) was a technology for the reenchantment of the world.[2] As is well known, Freud's systematic critique of mysticism, religion, as well as various political ideologies was rooted in his own definition of psychoanalysis as a science. The goal of this science was to enable an increasingly rational confrontation with the realities of human existence that rejects the consolation of these ideologies: "Thus I have not the courage to rise up before my fellow-men as a prophet, and I bow to their reproach that I can offer them no consolation: for at bottom that is what they are all demanding—the wildest revolutionaries no less passionately than the most virtuous believers."[3] In fact, in light of this inherent rejection of political as well as religious consolations, we could describe psychoanalysis as an ethics of disenchantment. We may recall here Freud's definition of a *Weltanschauung* as a particularly useful example of this line of argument: "a *Weltanschauung* is an intellectual construction which solves all the problems of our existence uniformly on the basis of one overriding hypothesis, which, accordingly, leaves no question unanswered and in which everything that interests us finds its fixed place. It will be understood that the possession of a *Weltanschauung* of this kind is among the ideal wishes of human beings."[4] To the degree that Freud identifies this wish for total explanations as a fundamental human desire, he also designates the desire for a meaningful world as one of the primary points of intervention for psychoanalysis.

2 For example, this is how Freud describes Nazi ideology in *The Future of an Illusion*: "One may describe as an illusion the assertation made by certain nationalists that the Indo-Germanic race is the only one capable of civilization; or the belief, which was only destroyed by psycho-analysis, that children are creatures without sexuality. What is characteristic of illusions is that they are derived from human wishes." Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 39.

3 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 154.

4 Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 195–96.

Chaplin's film, therefore, is clearly trying to teach its audiences something about desire and its political uses. We can go even further: The film is teaching us to read for desire—but not just any desire. It is teaching us to read for *the desire for the world*. The fact that desire has an object comes as no surprise. But what happens when the object of desire is identified with the world itself, the totality of all existing and all desirable objects? Whatever form the object of desire might take, object-desire might have to be complemented by this desire-for-the-world. Accordingly, Chaplin's film suggests that the very idea of the world must be located on the level of desire. In other words, the world becomes an object only to the degree that it can be construed as the object of desire. The world itself as the totality of existing objects does not exist in an objective way. Therefore, the world cannot be one object among all the existing objects. Its objectivity must be of a different order than the objects it supposedly includes within itself. What the film suggests is that the only way to make the world exist, to give it an "objective" form, is to turn it into an object of desire. In this regard, every desire might be split between the desire-for-the-object and another dimension of desire that always points beyond the specific object at hand. The particularity of the object of desire is complemented by the utopian universality of the world as the ultimate object of desire.[5]

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To be able to account for this desire-for-the-world, however, we might have to first address a more fundamental question: Can a sexed being have a world? Psychoanalysis broached this very question in an unprecedented manner during the first half of the twentieth century. The contemporary significance of psychoanalytic theory partly depends on this question. In the final analysis, the lesson of psychoanalysis appears to be that sex and the world are mutually

5 The ambiguous ending of Chaplin's film can be interpreted in this framework as well. Chaplin's other character, Hynkel's double, is the poor Jewish barber who, in the course of the events, gets mistaken for Hynkel and finds himself in the embarrassing position of having to address Hynkel's supporters at a large political rally. At this point, Chaplin's otherwise silent character breaks into a speech that is fully at odds with Hynkel's political program: he makes an appeal to universal humanism (a universality without exclusion). The film, however, suggests that the desire for world conquest and the desire for this universal humanism are merely mirror images of each other. The crowd cheers for them the exact same way.

exclusive categories. The fact that the English language often locates both of them in the register of "having" (one can "have" a world and one can "have" sex) might have led some of us to believe that sex is the fundamental anthropological determination or the human praxis (since "having" sex implies a set of bodily practices) that will necessarily lead us to the construction of a shared world.[6] After all, even in Freud's theory of the duality of the drives Eros first appears as the "life-instinct" that drives sexed beings toward each other and toward cosmic unification: "Thus the Libido of our sexual instincts would coincide with the Eros of poets and philosophers, which holds together all things living."[7] This depiction of Eros captures something essential about a dominant understanding of the ontological, the phenomenological, and the political significance of sex. Nonetheless, Freud's Eros is not the Eros of the poets and philosophers. As is well known, the entire wager of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* was to demonstrate (in a quasi-dialectical fashion) that, despite all appearances, Eros stands in the service of Thanatos. As a result, we also need to modify our understanding of the sexed being's relation to the world. In this Freudian sense, therefore, on the broadest metaphysical level, being sexed (rather than having sex) means that this "being" cannot ever be conceptualized as a closed totality. On the phenomenological level, this assumption implies that we can get only partial local consolations for this constitutive incompleteness of being. Even if on the level of lived experience we have the sensation that we are inhabiting various worlds, this phenomenological sensation cannot fully hide the ontological fact of the impossible closure of being. From time to time, we will have to come face-to-face with this metaphysical reality. On the political scene, it means that world-building does not carry an inherent positive political or social value in itself. Whatever meaning world-building might take on in a concrete historical setting, taken in its abstract generality "world-building" is not an ontologically grounded political project forever sheltered by its absolute necessity. We can surely imagine reprehensible political worlds that most of us would not hesitate to declare simply undesirable.

6 For Jacques Derrida's discussions of what it means to "have" a world, see his readings of Martin Heidegger in *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume II,* trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 90.

7 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 60–61.

In fact, Freud's entire theory is based on the presupposition of the fundamental worldlessness of life.[8] We should, once again, return for a moment to the problem of the duality of the drives. Freud first introduces the question of the sexual drives in his discussions of the "germ cells" responsible for the reproduction of the organism. Some instincts must govern these cells that accede to a physical independence from the organism of which they originally formed a part. In their independence, these germ cells "work against the death of the living substance and succeed in winning for it what we can only regard as potential immortality."[9] Nevertheless, the drives that "watch over the destinies" of these germ cells do have the same structure as the death drive: "one portion of their substance pursues its development to a finish, while another portion harks back once again as a fresh residual germ to the beginning of the process of development."[10] This brings us to Freud's oft-quoted description of the sexual or life drives:

> They are conservative in the same sense as the other drives in that they bring back earlier states of living substance; but they are conservative to a higher degree in that they are peculiarly resistant to external influences; and they are conservative too in another sense in that they preserve life itself for a comparatively long period. They are the true life drives. They operate against the purpose of the other drives, which leads, by reason of their function, to death; and this fact indicates that there is an opposition between them and the other drives.[11]

The conservative nature of sexual or life drives is defined here in terms that simultaneously assert a similarity and some differences. On the one hand, the life drives also bring back earlier stages of development, but they are even more resistant to external influences than the other drives. In a sense, we could say that they are even more worldless than the death drive. But, unlike the death drive, their goal is not death but a form of immortality. To put it differently, while the death drive represents some kind of an urge toward worldlessness (a return to an inorganic state), at first it appears that the life drives represent an urge toward the world. The point Freud insists on, however, is that life, as a principle of self-cancellation, has the structure of a self-interrupting development: "One

8 See Roland Végső, *Worldlessness After Heidegger: Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, Deconstruction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 128–92.

9 Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 48.

10 Freud, 48.

11 Freud, 48–49; translation modified, "drives" for Strachey's "instincts."

group of drives rushes forward so as to reach the final aim of life as swiftly as possible; but when a particular stage in the advance has been reached, the other group jerks back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey."[12] The movement described here is the original structure that might even predate the historical emergence of sexuality. Freud concludes that we must assume that the life drives were associated with the death drive from the very beginning.[13] Thus, the original structure of the drive (that predates the historical emergence of sexual reproduction) looks something like the following: The drive is a self-interrupting force whose goal is to return to a state of worldlessness. The sexual or life drives interrupt the death drive in order to guarantee that the latter can fulfil its original program. The whole purpose of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is to show not only that there is something beyond the pleasure principle but also that this "beyond" actually determines the functioning of the pleasure principle. Freud often repeats the thesis according to which the repetition-compulsion is more primitive than, and independent from, the pleasure principle, which in the end means for him that "the pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death drive."[14] In the same spirit, then, the worldlessness of the sexual drives should be defined in reference to the death drive. Sexual reproduction aims at the immortality of the species, but this immortality is in the service of the death drive.

At this juncture, therefore, we are not far from the conclusion that sex is worldless. Although sex appears to be a primary means of encountering the alterity of the world, for Freud it is not primarily or essentially a drive towards world-building. Yet, the psychoanalytic point is not simply that sex is worldless because it is fundamentally auto-erotic in nature and always leads the subject back to itself. Sex is worldless precisely because it introduces difference into the world. It is a fundamental opening up to otherness and, as such, it shatters every world. In other words, sex is not a way of accessing the world, but an agency of undoing the illusion of the world in order to finally return the subject to a state of worldlessness. The infamous Freudian "discontent" in civilization is itself a symptom of this worldlessness: a sexed being cannot simply inhabit social constructions as fully constituted worlds. The discontent produced by culture is the direct

12 Freud, 49.
13 Freud, 69.
14 Freud, 77.

correlate of the fact that only sexless beings would be able to live together harmoniously. No doubt, this understanding of sex is disturbing—a fact that also explains what Tim Dean and Oliver Davis diagnosed as the persistent "hatred of sex." Yet, as Dean and Davis argue, this hatred should not be conceptualized as a cultural construct or a mere fodder for historicism. Its universality is its most disturbing aspect.[15]

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Published in 1994, Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire* was a product of a historical moment when the politics of globalization reached one of its decisive turning-points: the early post-Cold War era that coincided with what today we call the rise of neoliberalism on a global scale.[16] As we know, this era defined itself ideologically as the glorious advent of the "end of history," which supposedly meant that the "world" finally came into being as a unified global market without the threat of Communism. According to this narrative, history ended precisely at the moment when the world was finally born as a unified entity.[17] Of course, the dominance of this narrative turned out to be short-lived, but it is worth emphasizing that the "world" itself was essentially reconceptualized in the early post-Cold War context as a post-historical concept. A unified world becomes possible only *after* the end of history since the term "history" itself implies that the fundamental antagonisms of humanity prevent us from constructing a truly global political and cultural universality. Historicism responded to this political

15 The authors make a set of openly "universal" claims about sex that are, at the same time, grounded on the insight that sex is in fundamental opposition to any conceivable identity: "Identities pose a special problem when it comes to sex because, as prototypically bound forms, they remain antipathetic to the effects of unbinding that characterize sexual pleasure at its most intense. Sex undoes identity. The contemporary shibboleth of "sexual identity' is, from the psychoanalytic point of view, a contradiction in terms." Oliver Davis and Tim Dean, *Hatred of Sex* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022), 32.

16 In this context, Susan Buck-Morss's concept of a "dreamworld" (borrowed from Walter Benjamin) might be especially helpful for understanding this transition to neoliberalism under the conditions of the Cold War; see *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

17 The unification of this world beyond the geopolitical divisions of the Cold War also implied that history ended precisely when the world was finally about to become flat. The two classic works in this context are Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992) and Thomas L. Friedman's *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2005).

conjuncture by deconstructing narratives that threatened to do away with history itself: The world is not yet born, these historicists claimed, because as a historical entity its arrival will always have to be postponed. Lacan, on the other hand, provided a different approach, since his works demonstrated that the real is worldless. In effect, the Lacanian argument renders obsolete the false choice between a post-historical, unified world and a historicized plurality of worlds.

In her book, Copjec formulated an ontological orientation, an aesthetic approach to cinema, and a theory of politics that can all be articulated with reference to the question whether a sexed being is capable of having a world. This concern with the world is a consistent theme in Copjec's work, including beyond *Read My Desire*. We can quote here *Imagine There is No Woman* to illustrate its persistence in her thinking:

> One of psychoanalysis's deepest insights is that we are born not into an already constituted world that impinges on our senses to form perceptions, but in the wake of a primordial loss; it is not, then, our relation to the order of things, but our relation to *das Ding* that decides the objectivity of our reality or its collapse. [. . .] In short, psychoanalysis does not take reality or the world for granted, but asks how the subject comes to constitute and thus "have" a reality or world.[18]

In this sense, at least, psychoanalysis already comes after the end of the world. One of the historical and theoretical preconditions of the rise of psychoanalysis is that the subject's relation to the world must first become problematic. "Having a world" is no longer a phenomenological given (as it was, for example, for Edmund Husserl or Martin Heidegger). Psychoanalysis belongs to those intellectual traditions that become possible only after "*the* world" is no longer a metaphysical certainty and, therefore, accounting for its existence (either in the singular or the plural) becomes once again an urgency. As the quotation above also illustrates, however, psychoanalysis comes after the world in yet another sense. The subject is constituted by a "primordial loss." On this level, the subject is not constituted by a desire for the world but by a hopeless quest after the "thing," that partial object that cannot be integrated seamlessly into the ordered hierarchies of a world.

[18] Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 192.

At the heart of Copjec's "linguistic materialism," therefore, we can identify two broader ontological assumptions, most clearly articulated in the introduction and the last chapter of *Read My Desire*. These two propositions can be reduced to the two following slogans: "structures are real" and "the world does not exist." In fact, it is the specific combination of these two ideas that makes Copjec's position especially interesting, because together these two theses demonstrate that Copjec does not see psychoanalysis as a simple form of metaphysical nihilism. The affirmation of the inexistence of the world does not immediately lead to the wholesale rejection of all forms and structures. The real is worldless, but this worldlessness is not a state of some kind of primordial chaos that is devoid of all kinds of formalizable organization. In other words, according to this position, the real in its very worldlessness is nevertheless structured.

In her critique of Michel Foucault and the historicism that his work inspired, Copjec takes us on an adventure in non-existence. Her argument follows three steps. First, language itself needs to be identified with the precondition of existence. As she puts it, "the existence of a thing materially depends on its being articulated in language, for only in this case can it be said to have an objective—that is to say, a verifiable—existence, and that can be debated by others."[19] At the same time, however, the second step consists of asserting the non-existence of a metalanguage: "No phenomenon appearing [in the field of phenomena] may be taken to account for, interpret, all the others; none stands above the others as the final interpretant, itself beyond interpretation."[20] As Copjec observes, this linguistic argument that simultaneously asserts language as the precondition of existence and denies the existence of a metalanguage might appear to "flatten out" the field of phenomena as it seems to reduce all phenomena to an undifferentiated field of immanence. But, in the final step, Copjec argues something quite different. It is precisely the non-existence of the "whole" that prevents this flat closure of all phenomena. The impossibility of a metalanguage guarantees that "the whole of society will never reveal itself in an analytical moment; no diagram will ever be able to display it fully, once and for all."[21]

19 Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 8.

20 Copjec, 8.

21 Copjec, 8.

Nevertheless, this rejection of the whole does not mean that Copjec wants to do away with the concept of totality. Totality remains an operative concept for her analyses, only it is now considered to be an effect of an ideological suture. In fact, Copjec explicitly states that one of the central concepts of *Read My Desire* is a specific notion of "totality" that sets Lacan and psychoanalysis apart both from deconstruction and historicism: the idea of a totality marked by an *internal limit*. Lacan's "paradoxical conception of the whole" holds that the infinite play of difference is based on a limit (which essentially produces a closed totality).[22] And Copjec adds, "the theories of suture, of groups, of sexual difference, all emerge from this logic."[23] While suture names the way a totality is formed out of the infinity of differences (in the register of the "as if"), sexual difference names the location where sex itself emerges as the internal limit of signification, sense, and reason. In the book's concluding chapter, the function of this internal limit is demonstrated through the Kantian analysis of the antinomies of cosmological ideas:

> Kant avoids the skeptical impasse by refusing to answer the question "Is the world finite or infinite?" and by instead negating the assumption implicit in the question: the world *is*. As long as one assumes that the world exists, the thesis and antithesis of the cosmological antinomy have to be regarded as contradictory, as mutually exclusive and exhaustive alternatives. One is thus forced to choose. But once this assumption is shown to be ill founded, neither alternative need be taken as true; a choice is no longer necessary. The solution to this antinomy, then, lies in demonstrating the very incoherency of this assumption, the *absolute impossibility* (Kant's words) of the world's existence. This is done by showing that the world is a self-contradictory concept, that the absolute totality of an endless progression is inconceivable, by definition.[24]

But the central argument of *Read My Desire* is that the Kantian antinomies of reason help us better understand the psychoanalytic notion of the sexuation of the subject. Copjec juxtaposes Kant's cosmological arguments to Lacan's formulae of sexuation and finds that the non-existence (or failure) of the world can be articulated in two different ways: The world can be impossible, or it can be prohibited. In Copjec's words: "Rather than defining a universe of men that is

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22 Copjec, 60.

23 Copjec, 60.

24 Copjec, 219–20.

complemented by a universe of women, Lacan defines man as the prohibition against constructing a universe and woman as the impossibility of doing so. The sexual relation fails for two reasons: it is impossible and it is prohibited. Put these two failures together; you will never come up with a whole."[25] Sex and the world seem to enter here a mutually exclusive relation. There is sex only to the degree that the world does not exist. Should the existence of the world be possible to demonstrate rationally, sex itself would cease to exist.

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Yet, as is well known, in spite of the theoretical demonstration of the absolute impossibility of the world's existence, Kant draws a set of practical conclusions from this cosmological antinomy that seems to reassert the necessity of the world. Kant's solution aims to avoid the skeptical impasse which otherwise would lead to moral relativism: Even if the world does not exist, he argues, we should act *as if* it existed. This conclusion is implicitly present in his analysis of the "teleological judgment," where he argues that we must proceed *as if* nature in its totality served some kind of purpose: "But what does even the most complete teleology of all prove in the end? Does it prove, say, that such an intelligent being [who created the world for a purpose] exists? No; all it proves is that, given the character of our cognitive powers, i.e., in connecting experience with the supreme principles of reason, we are absolutely unable to form a concept of [how] such a world is possible except by thinking of it as brought about by a supreme cause that *acts intentionally*."[26] As a result, science itself needs the purposiveness of nature in order to be able to describe the physical universe: "through this concept [the purposiveness of nature], we present nature as if an understanding contained the basis of the unity of what is diverse in nature's empirical laws."[27]

Still, this desire for the world is also legible in some of Kant's ethical reflections where once again the theoretical assertion of the impossibility of the world's existence is directly tied to the practical necessity of the world. This argument is most clearly legible in the essay entitled "To Eternal Peace," where Kant cites

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25 Copjec, 235.

26 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 281.

27 Kant, 20.

Ferdinand I's Latin motto: *fiat justitia, pereat mundus* [let justice be done even if the world should perish].[28] The theoretical complication encapsulated in this motto is quite disturbing. Upon first reading, it seems to suggest that the ethical imperative to do what is just is more important than the world itself. If we take this proposition literally, we must conclude that there might be situations in which the ethically correct act might imply the perishing of the world. Yet, how can an ethical act be content with the destruction of the world as one of its possible consequences? Is it even possible to conceive of an ethics that would be a fundamentally world-destroying agency?

Kant does have an answer to these questions which aims to restore the world to its rightful glory. The solution is simple: The ethical act does not destroy the world. To the contrary, the rational constitution of the subject entails that the ethical disposition of humanity will eventually lead to the fully rational and just organization of the world. In other words, if we follow Copjec's lead and read for the desire that is articulated here, we find that the motto *fiat justitia, pereat mundus* is not a program for the destruction of the world but an expression of the Kantian desire for the world in spite of its theoretical impossibility. Kant effectively shows that it would be irrational to strive for the perishing of the world and further argues that irrationality is a self-eliminating tendency in humanity. The irrational "rogues" will be eventually eliminated by history, leaving only rational and ethical creatures behind. As a result, when justice is done, it is not the whole world that is destroyed but only its undesirable elements.[29]

This is why I find it important to emphasize that Copjec draws a very different set of conclusions from the non-existence of the world. At least, this is how I interpret the concluding imperative of *Read My Desire*, which announces the need for a new kind of ethics: "Another logic of the superego must commence."[30] This imperative suggests that we need to establish a different relationship to the law and, thus, to the world itself: a properly feminine ethics that escapes the "superegoic logic of exception or limit."[31] This alternative or other logic, however,

28 Kant, "To Eternal Peace," in *Basic Writings of Kant*, ed. Allen W. Wood (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 467.

29 For a brief overview of Kant's definition of the world, see Sean Gaston, *The Concept of the World from Kant to Derrida* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013).

30 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 236.

31 Copjec, 236.

cannot be the mere inversion of the opposing theses of the antinomies of reason. It must provide us a way out of these aporias—including the Kantian tension between the theoretical impossibility and the practical (or, in the language of the third *Critique*, the teleological) necessity of the world.

The imperative of our times is that of world-building which translates into a specific, superegoic command. To put it differently, Hannah Arendt's principle of *amor mundi* (the love of the world), formulated in the middle of the twentieth century as her response to the modern "disenchantment of the world," has in the meantime become a superegoic command: You must love the world![32] As has been noted by a number of psychoanalytically-oriented thinkers, this inversion is characteristic of our times. For Arendt, the love of the world primarily meant that human beings needed to learn to accept the world as it really is with all its imperfections. She believes that this love is fully consistent with a critique of social and historical formations. The contemporary problem that we are facing now, however, is that the idea of the world has been increasingly elevated to a plane beyond criticism. Arendt's message, "You should learn to love the world," has been transformed into the objection: "How can you not love the world?" In various discourses of our times, therefore, the idea of the world has been effectively fetishized.[33]

Against this tendency, *Read My Desire* proposes a different approach. Copjec's work suggests that the world as an object of desire cannot be the predetermined guiding principle of our actions. Rather, we need a position "beyond" the love of the world. If Copjec's central argument against historicism was that the latter failed to account for the historically specific production of a relation to the non-historical real, we can also assume that her ethics will have a similar structure. This ethics is oriented toward something irreducible to the status of both an inner-worldly object as well as the status of a world that could be the totality of phenomena or objects. The promise of this new ethics, therefore, is not that "another world is possible" (which would simply return us to a historicist

32 Arendt discusses the idea of "amor mundi" in her journals in some detail. The evidence seems to suggest that this term was going to serve as the original title for the project that was later published as her book *The Human Condition*. See Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch, 1950–1973*, ed. Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann (Munich: Piper Verlag, 2002), 523.

33 For a discussion of the fetishization of the idea of the world, see Claire Colebrook, *Who Would You Kill to Save the World?* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023).

future that projects an infinity of possible worlds for us or to a deconstructive postponement of the final arrival of the world) but something more sinister and more promising at the same time: Something other than a world is possible.

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Copjec's readings of cinema also allow us to interpret this specific media technology and art-form as a historical correlate of the modern desire for the world. Georg Lukács makes a similar argument about the novel as a specifically modern genre in *The Theory of the Novel*. Lukács argues that the novel is the quintessential literary genre of an age that already knows that *the* world does not exist but nonetheless still needs to think in terms of totality. In this sense, for Lukács, a long fictional prose narrative becomes a proper novel only if its form somehow marks the impossibility of formalizing modern historical experiences.[34] In a similar way, Copjec's analyses of various films suggest that cinema is certainly capable of providing for the viewing subjects the desired "suture" of their fragmented historical experiences. Yet cinema is also capable of marking, on the level of its formal constitution, the "absolute impossibility of the world's existence."

Copjec's reading of Chris Marker's classic film, *La Jetée*, is a case in point. Copjec turns to the film in the context of a discussion of anxiety and goes as far as saying that this film "is one of the most compelling examples one will ever find of the anxiety that attends the experience of the uncanny."[35] The film takes place after World War III, in a post-apocalyptic Paris, where the survivors of atomic war are forced to live underground. In order to try to save what is left of their world, scientists are experimenting with time travel. The protagonist of the film is one of their test subjects, who shows an unusually strong attachment to the past: He is haunted by a childhood memory that provides the title for the film. In this memory—which, the narrator tells us, is his only memory that survived from before the war—the child is standing on the main jetty (the observation deck) at Orly airport watching the planes depart in the sunset. The memory is dominated by the image of the face of an unknown woman. Suddenly, there

34 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974).

35 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 130.

is a disturbance, and an unidentified man is killed in the crowd gathered on the jetty.[36]

At this point, one might suspect that the film is a variation on an already familiar theme: The protagonist needs to solve the mystery of this childhood memory to save the world. However, Copjec's reading fully inverts the terms of this interpretation. In fact, she argues that the first thing we need to accept is that the film is about "the necessity of forgetting" rather than the protagonist's need to remember: "At the end of World War III, the world in which the hero lives is on the edge of complete extinction, it cannot 'take flight,' remains stuck in place. Why? The world has survived, barely, the nuclear war, but what it cannot survive is the hero's refusal to reject this memory. It is he who has condemned his world to destruction; the world is in danger as long as the memory endures."[37] In other words, the film is about the necessary struggle to negate the obsessive image that haunts the protagonist's present. Yet, at first this might seem like a paradoxical proposition, since the memory image is precisely that of "the world" before it was destroyed by atomic warfare. To put it differently, it is the memory of the fullness of the world that needs to be eliminated in order to guarantee the survival of humanity.

What does the film propose in place of this memory of the world? In effect, the solution to the mystery of the memory is that the protagonist needs to understand that it was his own death that was preserved in this memory rather than his love of the world. As part of the scientific experiments, the protagonist is sent back to the past where he develops a relationship with the woman whose image appeared in his childhood memory. As Copjec puts it, "In *La Jetée* the hero allows himself to enjoy the woman."[38] However, this enjoyment beyond prohibition is at odds with the world itself: "The negativism of psychotics is proof of this; libidinal cathexis is withdrawn from the world, producing the psychotic experience of the 'end of the world.'"[39]

36 *La Jetée*, dir. Chris Marker (Argos Films, 1962).
37 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 130–31.
38 Copjec, 131.
39 Copjec, 131.

After these successful adventures into the past, the scientists decide to send him to the future. While the representatives of the technologically more advanced future society that our protagonist encounters there clearly disapprove of his presence in their time, they nevertheless accept the argument that, by saving their own past, they can guarantee the existence of their own present. In the end, they provide him with "a power unit strong enough to put all human industry back into motion."[40] It looks like the world is finally saved. This is not where the story ends, though. Once our protagonist returns to his own present, he understands that he has served his purpose for his jailers and will be executed. Even if the world is saved now, the subject has become a redundant excessive element. The narrator explains, "Now he only waited to be liquidated with, somewhere inside him, the memory of a twice-lived fragment of time."[41] While in this state of "limbo," the representatives of the future society contact him once again. They give our protagonist a choice: He can return to the lost world of the past or he can enter the "pacified" utopian world of the future. The man willfully rejects the utopian future world as well as the dystopian dying world of his present and asks to be returned to "the world of his childhood" to be reunited with the "woman who was perhaps waiting for him."[42]

This is the moment for the final revelation of the film. Once he is returned to the past, the protagonist finds himself in the middle of the childhood memory that haunted him his entire life. He is once again standing on the main jetty at Orly facing the woman he loves. But now, in place of the lost world, he is merely given a revelation: He understands that there is "no escaping time," and that he had never had a world but merely an "image of his own death."[43] As he is running toward the woman on the jetty, he recognizes a man in the crowd who has been following him. This man is an agent sent by his underground jailers to kill him. The recovery of the lost world of the past is prevented by his death. As the final image of his dead body fades out and the film ends, we are led to believe once again that the subject and the world are mutually exclusive categories. In other words, the "image" that haunted the protagonist might refer to something real—the fact of human finitude—but it does not constitute a world.

40 *La Jetée*, dir. Chris Marker.
41 *La Jetée*, dir. Chris Marker.
42 *La Jetée*, dir. Chris Marker.
43 *La Jetée*, dir. Chris Marker.

We must also note, however, that the overall formal characteristics of the film must be interpreted through this same conclusion. The film's most compelling peculiarity is that it is narrated through static photographic images. As Copjec herself remarks, there is only one exception to this rule: "there is no illusion of movement in this "photo-novel' composed of still photographs, except at one point where the woman whose image the hero refuses to surrender opens her eyes to look at the hero—an image of desire rather than anxiety."[44] This image of desire (which is also a desire for the world) is in stark contrast with the anxiety produced by the rest of the film. To put it differently, the aesthetics of the film can be interpreted in terms of a dialectical destruction of cinema itself. On the one hand, on this formal level, the film simply exposes the material essence of cinema. As we all know, every film consists of static photographic images that are projected in a quick temporal sequence. On the other hand, however, the film destroys the illusion of motion that is the primary effect of film. Apart from one image, we are not watching proper "motion pictures" in this film. The ultimate effect of this technique is that *La Jetée* denies us the cinematic illusion of a projected world. In this sense, it reproduces on a formal level the same impossibility that marked its content. Just as the protagonist, as a sexed being, is incapable of regaining his lost world, the film itself denies its audiences the illusion of a projected full world precisely by exposing the material structure of cinema. Cinema is capable of evoking the desire for the world (which is represented here by the woman's illusory look); but, through a different deployment of the same mechanisms that created this desire, it is also capable of exposing this illusion as a mere fantasy.

So, just as Chaplin's film provided us a formula for popping the balloon of the world, *La Jetée* offers us a lesson in the politics of desire. If the desire for the world, like all desire, is a historical effect rather than an immanent cause, its intense contemporary emergence exposes one of our most dangerous weaknesses. Just as *La Jetée* suggests, today, the desire for the world might very well be the point where the totality of life can be captured by ever more efficient technologies of power. As many commentators have observed, we are living in a historical era that is increasingly defined by a generalized sense of cultural disorientation. This catastrophic experience is often described as the loss of a common or shared world. It is, therefore, not a surprise that over the last several decades

44 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 131.

the proliferation of "apocalyptic" narratives announcing the end of the world (due to natural, economic, social, and political catastrophes) has gone hand-in-hand with the intensification of the rhetoric of world-building. *La Jetée*, however, shows us that, caught between the promise of a fully pacified future and the memory of a lost world, the subject finds itself thrown into a technologically manipulated and worldless present. Using Copjec's terms, therefore, we could conclude that the film is asking us to reconceptualize our relation to this inalienable worldlessness: it suggests that we need to leave behind the masculine prohibition on the world (which is the dialectical source of the desire for the world) in favor of the feminine impossibility of the world.

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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