2
2025

Filozofski vestnik

JOAN COPJEC'S *READ MY DESIRE: LACAN AGAINST THE HISTORICISTS*, 30 YEARS ON

Uredil / Edited by
Nathan Gorelick

Filozofski vestnik

Založba ZRC

ISSN 0353 4510
Letnik/*Volume* 46
Številka/*Number* 2
Ljubljana 2025

Naslov uredništva
Filozofski vestnik
p. p. 306, 1001 Ljubljana
Tel.: (01) 470 64 70

Editorial Office Address
Filozofski vestnik
P.O. Box 306, SI-1001 Ljubljana, Slovenia
Phone: +386 (1) 470 64 70

filozofski.vestnik@zrc-sazu.si | https://ojs.zrc-sazu.si/filozofski-vestnik/

Revija izhaja trikrat letno. | *The journal is published three times annually.*

Letna naročnina: 21 € za posameznike, 40 € za ustanove.
Letna naročnina za študente in dijake: 12,50 €. Cena posamezne številke: 10 €.
Annual subscription: €21 for individuals, €40 for institutions.
Single issues: €10 for individuals, €20 for institutions.
Arhiv preteklih številk je na voljo na spletni strani revije.
The archive of past issues is available on the journal's website.

Naročila sprejema
Založba ZRC
p. p. 306, 1001 Ljubljana
Tel.: (01) 470 64 65
E-pošta: narocanje@zrc-sazu.si

Orders should be sent to
Založba ZRC
P.O. Box 306, SI-1001 Ljubljana, Slovenia
Phone: +386 (1) 470 64 65
Email: narocanje@zrc-sazu.si

Oblikovanje | *Design*: Pekinpah
Tisk | *Printed by*: Birografika Bori
Naklada | *Print run*: 300

Filozofski vestnik

Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*, 30 Years On

Uredil / Edited by
Nathan Gorelick

46 | 2/2025

Izdaja | Issued by
ZRC SAZU, Filozofski inštitut
Institute of Philosophy

Založnik | Published by
Založba ZRC

Ljubljana 2025

Contents

Filozofski vestnik | Volume 46 | Number 2 | 2025

Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*, 30 Years On

Edited by Nathan Gorelick

Kazalo

Filozofski vestnik | Letnik 46 | Številka 2 | 2025

Joan Copjec in *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*, trideset let pozneje

Uredil Nathan Gorelick

Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*, 30 Years On

Edited by Nathan Gorelick

Filozofski vestnik
ISSN 0353-4510 | Volume 46 | Number 2 | 2025 | 7–39
CC BY-SA 4.0 | DOI: 10.3986/FV.46.2.01

Nathan Gorelick*

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

* Barnard College, New York, NY, USA
ngorelick@barnard.edu | https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7536-6443

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.

∞

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

---

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]

[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

---

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

---

[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.

References

Catlin, Samuel. "The Campus Does Not Exist." *Parapraxis* 4, https://www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/the-campus-does-not-exist.

Christofferson, Michael Scott. "Foucault and New Philosophy: Why Foucault Endorsed André Glucksmann's *The Master Thinkers*." *Foucault and Neoliberalism*, edited by Daniel Zamora and Michael C. Behrent, 6–23. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2016.

Copjec, Joan. "May '68, The Emotional Month." *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, edited by Slavoj Žižek, 90–113. New York: Verso, 2006.

———. *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994.

Dews, Peter. "The *Nouveau Philosophie* and Foucault." *Economy and Society* 8, no. 2 (May 1979): 127–71.

Dollé, Jean-Paul. *Le désir de revolution*. Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1975.

Dean, Mitchell, and Daniel Zamora. *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution*. New York: Verso, 2021.

———. "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.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Glucksmann, André. *The Master Thinkers*. Translated by Brian Pearce. New York: Harper & Row, 1980.

Gorelick, Nathan. "*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/.

Johnston, Adrian. "Lacanian Theory Has Legs: Structures Marching in the Streets." *South Atlantic Review* 72, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 99–105.

Johnston, Adrian, Boštjan Nedoh, and Alenka Zupančič, eds. *Objective Fictions: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, Marxism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021.

Kemper, Jakko. "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.

Knabb, Ken, ed. *Situationist International Anthology, Revised and Expanded Edition*. Translated by Ken Knabb. Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006.

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

Kornbluh, Anna. *Immediacy, or the Style of Too-Late Capitalism*. New York: Verso, 2024.

Lacan, Jacques. *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*. Translated by Bruce Fink. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 20. New York: W. W. Norton, 1998.

———. "Impromptu at Vincennes." Translated by Jeffrey Mehlman. *October* 40 (Spring, 1987): 116–27.

———. *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Russell Grigg. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 17. New York: W. W. Norton, 2006.

———. *Television / A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*. Edited by Joan Copjec. Translated by Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson. New York: W. W. Norton, 1990.

Ladreau, Guy and Christian Jambet. *L'Ange: Pour une cynégétique du semblant*. Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1976.

Leader, Darian. "Lacan's Myths." In *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, edited by Jean-Michel Rabaté, 35–49. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

McGowan, Todd. *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007.

———, and Ryan Engley, hosts. "Read My Desire, Pt. 1: Gaze and Excess." *Why Theory*. June 13, 2021. https://creators.spotify.com/pod/profile/why-theory9/episodes/Read-My-Desire--Pt--1-Gaze-and-Excess-e2qgio3.

Proctor, Hannah. "A Common Craziness: Diagnosing Youth Revolt at the Columbia 1968 Uprisings." *Parapraxis* 6, https://www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/a-common-craziness.

Rabaté, Jean-Michel. "Lacan's Dora against Lévi-Strauss." *Yale French Studies* 123 (2013): 129–44.

Smith, Anthony Paul. "The Speculative Angel." In *Speculative Medievalisms: Discography*, edited by The Petropunk Collective, 45–64. Brooklyn, NY: Punctum, 2013.

Soto van der Plas, Christina, Edgar Miguel Juárez-Salazar, Carlos Gómez Camarena, and David Pavón-Cuellar, eds. *The Marx Through Lacan Vocabulary: A Compass for Libidinal and Political Economies*. London: Routledge, 2022.

Stein, Gertrude. *Selections*. Edited by Joan Retallack. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

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

Williams, James. *Stand out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Žižek, Slavoj. *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*. New York: Verso, 1991.

Zupančič, Alenka. *Disavowal*. Cambridge: Polity, 2024.

Filozofski vestnik
ISSN 0353-4510 | Volume 46 | Number 2 | 2025 | 41–65
 | DOI: 10.3986/FV.46.2.02

James Penney*

Queer Phantom Critters: Varieties of Causality in Agential Realism and Psychoanalysis

Keywords
Joan Copjec, Jacques Lacan, Karen Barad, agential realism, causality, microbiology, science, queer theory

Abstract
What are the contemporary forms of the Foucauldian historicism that *Read My Desire* sought to correct? In the theoretical humanities, the most insurgent variant is surely the revival of the turn not to the real, but to reality; to the material or phenomenal and, ultimately, to being as such. Generally speaking, this contemporary orientation of thought aims either to emancipate humanity from the determinative distortions of subjectivity, of the transcendental constitution of apperception, or else dislodge this human function from the privilege of its presumed centrality, thereby relegating it to the same plane occupied by every other animate and inanimate being. As this paper argues, the agential realist's definition of causality, despite its claims to complexity and indeterminacy (not to mention a lineage that connects back to the same structuralist linguistics that shaped Lacan's thought), is ultimately guilty on the charge of historicism. Precisely in their allergy to the strange causal faculty of negativity, the argument's conceptions of "material-discursive interactions" and "intra-agential spactimematterings" are the crime's telltale clues. In short, the ambiguously defined relation of discourse to a consistently indeterminate idea of matter, and the subsequent disappearance of discourse's non-closure or incompletion from the causal field, not only obfuscates the signifier's retroactive creationist powers, but also renders illegible what we might call the desire of the empirical natural sciences in both their humanist-progressivist and properly unconscious forms.

* Trent University, Peterborough, ON, Canada
jamespenney@trentu.ca | https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5885-3588

Kvir fantomska bitja: raznolike vzročnosti v agentnem realizmu in psihoanalizi

Ključne besede
Joan Copjec, Jacques Lacan, Karen Barad, agentni realizem, vzročnost, mikrobiologija, znanost, kvir teorija

Povzetek
Katere so sodobne oblike foucaultovskega historicizma, ki ga je knjižni projekt *Read My Desire* poskušal popraviti? V teoretski humanistiki je danes zagotovo najbolj prodorna različica omenjenega historicizma oživitev obrata ne k realnemu, temveč k realnosti, skratka, k materialnemu oziroma fenomenalnemu in navsezadnje k biti kot taki. Na splošno je cilj te sodobne miselne usmeritve bodisi emancipirati človeštvo od določujočih popačenj subjektivnosti, od transcendentalne konstitucije apercepcije, bodisi tej človeški funkciji odvzeti privilegij njene domnevne osrednje vloge in jo s tem zvesti na raven, ki jo zasedajo vsa druga živa in neživa bitja. V članku avtor trdi, da definicija vzročnosti, kot jo poda agentni realizem, kljub trditvam o svoji kompleksnosti in nedoločenosti (da ne omenjam linije, ki se navezuje na isto strukturalno lingvistiko, ki je oblikovala Lacanovo misel) na koncu pade pod obtožbo historicizma. Prav zaradi svoje alergičnosti do nenavadne vzročne zmožnost negativnosti so pojmovanja »materialno-diskurzivnih interakcij« in »znotraj-agentnih prostorsko-časovnih pomenov« v argumentu agentnega realizma indic njegovega zločina. Skratka, dvoumno opredeljeno razmerje diskurza do dosledno nedoločene ideje materije in posledično izginotje diskurzivne nezaključenosti oziroma necelosti diskurza iz polja vzročnosti ne le zamegljuje retroaktivno kreacionistično moč označevalca, temveč tudi dela neberljivo tisto, kar bi lahko imenovali želja empiričnih naravoslovnih znanosti, tako v njeni humanistično-progresivistični kot tudi v resnično nezavedni obliki.

∞

Prelude: Historicism's Tenacity

Apart from the realization that I had unwittingly plagiarized our text of concern slightly more often than I would have guessed, a recent rereading of Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire* delivered one overarching observation: In the three decades since its original publication, the fields in which it boldly intervened—film and literary studies, philosophy and critical theory, feminism and gender

studies, architecture and political thought—have almost entirely failed to reckon with the consequences of its pathbreaking argument.

I recall my initial reading of the book upon its release shortly after I had begun to study Freud and Lacan seriously and become enamoured with Slavoj Žižek's early work. It was impossible not to notice that the discussion was leaps and bounds ahead in accuracy and nuance of predecessor volumes like Jane Gallop's *Reading Lacan*, Elizabeth Grosz's *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* or even, on a notably higher level of quality, Kaja Silverman's *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*. *Read My Desire* provided a disarmingly direct and uncommonly rigorous argument for what was still, for me, only an intuition: The implicit, pragmatic message of the vast majority of my then (and future) professors—that the cultural text should be methodologically primary; that the array of late twentieth-century theoretical humanities discourses is a toolbox from which one may choose the instrument most apparently appropriate to the interpretative task at hand; that the elaboration of concepts is determined by the empirical and historical specificity of the object of inquiry onto which they are applied—did a disservice both to theoretical inquiry and to the text itself.

These assumptions were now stood on their heads to most salutary effect. The texts of culture became not only symptomatic expressions of psychosocial antagonism, a view already familiar to both psychoanalytic and Marxist literary and cultural studies, but also means of properly theoretical inquiry by another name, provided you knew how to read them—to read their desire, as it were. Further, despite the demonstrable existence of rudimentary anticipations in the intellectual tradition, Freud's formulation of the unconscious subject, especially as refined and formalized by Lacan, became singularly revolutionary, untranslatable into the idioms of any prior or subsequent thought system without consequential distortion. Finally (and most importantly in my view both then and now), conceptualization—precise and contextualized, even if concepts can never fully be reduced to context—was shown to matter: Lacanian and historicist iterations of "the gaze," for example, produced wildly incompatible understandings of what we used to call the apparatus, with immediate practical consequences for, among other things, the feminist analysis of spectatorship.

That Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" rather than Copjec's "The Orthopsychic Subject" is not only, judging by its copious reprinting in

critical anthologies, the more canonical essay, but also the one in my experience more familiar to the current generation of advanced students, might appear to be cause for dismay. Is the future of psychoanalytic theory in the transdisciplinary humanities even more inauspicious today than it has been deemed to be, quite consistently, since *Read My Desire*'s appearance on the critical scene? To be sure, we can see in the book's emphatic enunciative opposition to a then-dominant but hardly moribund Foucauldian discourse/power/knowledge instrument an expression of psychoanalysis's institutional marginality, which of course continues today, even if this marginality is surely inseparable from the decline of the humanities more generally in the age of corporate austerity in higher education and the relentless advance of a neofeudalistic cloud-based postcapitalism.[1]

Meanwhile, outside academic circles and in the clinical milieu, the culture wars appear to have deepened (Lacanian) psychoanalysis's sense of its relative cultural marginality. In a response to a French media firestorm set off by Paul B. Preciado's 2019 address to the *École de la cause freudienne* in Paris, Jacques-Alain Miller decried how what he terms "the trans crisis" has further hegemonized the proprietary epistemologies of identity politics by framing the psychoanalytic act of interpretation not as the indexation of language's internal limit or impossibility, but rather as an expression of a "detestable"—and precisely late-Foucauldian—instantiation of "power-knowledge."[2] Miller's discourse rightly insists on questioning the assumption that the proper analytic response to the more activist register of trans discourse is to be "docile." Indeed, a careful reading or his essay exposes the gulf that separates the hostile (and paranoid) analysis-as-panopticon scenario from the clinician's ethical commitment to listen carefully to trans patients—at least the ones that "express the desire to be listened to"[3]—as they come. However, Miller's intervention veers towards the apocalyptic as it conjures a kind of queer-trans Inquisition that threatens to burn the guardians

1 The allusion is to Yanis Varoufakis's recent (and persuasive) argument: The economic system that supports the digital platforms, specifically in this system's extraction of cloud rents (via fees for platform access or shares of sales revenues) and free labour, marks the end of the capitalist system as we know it and the emergence of a kind of virtual neofeudalism. See *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2023).

2 Jacques-Alain Miller, "Docile to Trans," trans. Philip Dravers, Pamela King, and Peggy Papada, *The Symptom* 18 (2019): https://www.lacan.com/symptom/docile-to-trans-by-jacques-alain-miller.

3 Miller.

of (allegedly) patriarchal and heterosexist knowledge systems at the stake. The strong language leaves the impression that psychoanalysis today finds itself on the ropes, bruised and battered by the decline of the phallic function's authority as new fundamentalist waves from both left and right threaten to converge in a paroxysmal tsunami of hateful, death-bearing jouissance.[4]

Far from baseless, Miller's discourse nonetheless overstates—somewhat melodramatically, one might add—the extent of the crisis. Those among us who have toiled in Anglo-American academia for decades now no doubt will shrug and say, "'Twas ever thus." The small group of psychoanalytic students of my generation, the one that came of intellectual age precisely at the time of *Read My Desire*'s publication, already felt that we had arrived too late, that we had missed the heyday of psychoanalysis in the theoretical humanities. In consequence, we felt tremendous pressure demurely to acquiesce at those inevitable moments in job interviews when you are cued to acknowledge that no, in fact, you do not take psychoanalysis or Lacan quite as seriously as your cover letter or early publications might suggest, and that on the contrary you are theoretically flexible, promiscuous in fact. One central realization afforded by the passage of time since *Read My Desire*'s initial appearance is that whatever sense of decline may have hung in the air during this period was based on a retrospective illusion. Indeed, if the decade beginning in the late 1970s had witnessed an undeniable *engouement* for Lacan in feminism, sexuality studies, and film theory in both the US and the UK, then this was largely (though not exclusively, of course) due to the fact that Lacan had been thoroughly misrepresented, either as an improperly or insufficiently politicized Foucauldian historicist or as a Derridean deconstructionist (or proto-Deleuzian) yet to rid himself of the retrograde accoutrements of Oedipal phallocracy.

To be sure, Freud himself was acutely aware of the difficulty of propagating a praxis whose fundamental tenets include the inevitability of resistance to its

[4] Those with more knowledge of the French clinical field than I have might wish to cite here a decline in the social system's support of clinical practice and the rise of racist right-wing extremism in French culture to justify Miller's pessimism. My basic point, however, is that such hindrances to the vitality of clinical practice have always existed in most national situations where Lacanian psychoanalysis is present. On the assumption that it is now over, the golden age of state support for, and general cultural interest in, clinical psychoanalysis in France is very much an exception to the historical rule.

thoroughgoing assimilation. Freudian psychoanalysis, in other words, was the discourse that not only anticipated, but also theorized, its own recursive failures in advance. In so doing, it surely guaranteed the resilience of the most unceasing reproach against it: the unfairly "tautological" nature of its notion of resistance, that is, which adherents can fling back at all possible counterarguments. But psychoanalysis's awareness of its weak discursive position may also have helped to secure its paradoxical survival into perpetuity in a quite peculiar form: never institutionally stable, but also always surviving in the interstices, on the margins; never properly integrated into academic orthodoxy, but also spectrally transdisciplinary, subverting dominant theories and methods from within; perennially on life support, perhaps, but also never definitively dead.

As psychoanalysis instructs, that familiar, lonely feeling of not being heard, of addressing oneself to an Other who lacks the knowledge required for understanding, is a structural rather than an occasional or circumstantial affect. Indeed, as Lacan himself drily remarked on the topic of his teaching, voicing an impression unfamiliar to no public advocate of psychoanalysis, "*Je parle aux murs*" (literally: "I'm talking to the walls").[5] If, however, to remain blind to the evidence of psychoanalysis's marginality today, to the seemingly insurmountable quality of the obstacles it faces, is naive; if these obstacles seem more forbidding at present than in some actual or imaginary past, then this is surely because its lessons are as urgent, necessary, and precious as they have ever been since its inception.

If there is any merit to this general sense of things, then the application of *Read My Desire*'s insights to today's dominant discourses should prove enlighteningly productive. What, then, are the contemporary forms of the historicist deviationism that Copjec's book sought to correct? The suspects are far from lacking. On the level of popular social discourses, we might wonder if the mutually reinforcing agencies of a resurgent identity politics and a hateful intolerance of difference are not best conceived as a kind of illiteracy in desire. Indeed, the multiplying fronts of the recent past's culture wars have demonstrated how advocating for the freedom to define myself and my community unilaterally through

5 This is the title of a collection of addresses Lacan gave at the chapel of the Sainte Anne hospital in Paris in 1971 and 1972. See Jacques Lacan, *Je parle aux murs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2012).

the workings of a kind of egoic, proprietary epistemology; imposing inviolable conditions for the Other's impingement on my consciousness, on my thoughts; or refusing to acknowledge any limit to my right to jouissance, or indeed to my *capacity* to enjoy, each disavow my own otherness to myself by figuring psychical space as both immune to the defiles of the signifier and "realtight,"[6] to borrow *Read My Desire*'s concise and widely applicable term.

In the worlds of philosophy and the theoretical humanities more generally, however, the most insurgent iteration of historicism has probably been the revival of the turn not to the real, but rather to reality; to the material or phenomenal and, ultimately, to being as such. Generally, this contemporary orientation of thought aims either to emancipate humanity from the determinative distortions of subjectivity, of the transcendental construction of human apperception, or else dislodge this function from the privilege of its presumed centrical position, thereby relegating it to the same plane occupied by every other animate and inanimate object. In general, mathematics and the natural sciences have figured as the royal roads to the "great outdoors" that would finally purify thought of its congenital (human) species-centrism.

I will take as an especially consequential example of this tendency the work of Karen Barad (and one of her collaborators), and more specifically her doctrine of agential realism, singling out its finely argued, postclassical conception of a queer causality as well as the performative ontology that shapes its conceptualization. Among other things, Barad's admirable project aims to incorporate the Derridean motifs of performativity, iterability, and *différance* into the world of the natural sciences, bringing to bear insights derived from Derrida's subversive reading of structuralist linguistics on the question of matter, defined empirically as the realm of phenomena of a quantum physical, electromagnetic, or microbiological nature, for instance.

To the dramatic difference of the work of Quentin Meillassoux or Alain Badiou, in which ontology is either partly (for the former) or purely (for the latter) an *a priori* question of mathematics, in Barad's framework the data generated by the technological measurement of natural phenomena hold direct consequences for the inquiry into being. In this light we can see how Barad's working definition

6 Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (London: Verso, 2015), 14.

of the ontology she rejects—and more specifically its references to "discrete entities that interact with one another," "locally determinate causal" relations, as well as "the motion of entities moving through space in accord with the linear flow of time"—is classical only in a specifically modern sense.[7] This is the sense that took hold in earliest modernity after our concept of science shifted from the Platonic study of nonsensuous forms to its experimental meaning: the inquiry into empirical phenomena, what the Greeks called *phusis* (φμσισ): the physical world of natural matter.

Agential realism is an appropriate system to test for traits of historicism because, just like *Read My Desire*'s project, it aims to give an account of generative principles, of the mechanisms of matter's very materialization. This assertion's validity holds even after we acknowledge that Barad's discourse broaches the question, from its own perspective at least, more broadly; in a way, precisely, that includes both the social and the physical-material realms, or rather deconstructs or "genealogizes" the distinction between the two. In a different idiom, what is at issue in the first instance is the matter of causality, or more precisely the matter of the causality inherent in matter. Recall that Copjec elegantly defined its historicist variety as a form of immanentism: based, that is, on a "conception of a cause that is immanent within the field of its effects."[8] Lacan himself put this same idea more colloquially: "There is cause only from what doesn't work (*Il n'y a de cause que de ce qui cloche*)."[9] The suggestion here is that though causality is a legitimate category for thought, there is a kind of hiatus or difference in register that dissociates effect from cause: To place them on the same plane is to commit a category error inasmuch as the determinism involved in their relation is faulty, though it remains operative *as faulty or dysfunctional* nevertheless.

To lay my cards on the table, I argue in what follows that Barad's understanding of causality, despite its claims to complexity and indeterminacy (not to mention a lineage that connects back to the same structuralist linguistics that shaped Lacan's thought), is ultimately guilty on the charge of historicism. Precisely, in their allergy to the strange causal faculty of the negative, the agential realist's

---

7 Karen Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity," *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (January 2011): 146.

8 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 6.

9 Jacques Lacan, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 30; my translation.

conceptions of "material-discursive interactions" and so-called "intra-agential spactimematterings"[10] are the crime's telltale clues. In short, the ambiguously defined relation of discourse to a consistently indeterminate idea of *phusis*, and the subsequent disappearance of discourse's non-closure or incompletion from the causal field, not only obfuscates the signifier's retroactive creationist powers, but also renders illegible what we might call the desire of the empirical natural sciences in both their humanist-progressivist and properly unconscious forms. As I aim to show, the divergent varieties of causality in agential realism and psychoanalysis are informed respectively by a notion of the *indeterminacy* of matter and an idea of the *incompleteness* of discourse as well as being itself.

Causality *sans* Object?

As Barad presents it, agential realism has two primary goals. First, as we have already seen, it aims to delegitimate the hard conceptual distinction between nature and culture. This is the distinction responsible for structuring, among other things, the sex and gender concepts that characterized a certain generational iteration of feminist theory and was later attacked, beginning in the late 1980s, in the earliest arguments of queer theory. Though she routinely cites Judith Butler's work as an inspiration for what she describes as her performative account of materialization, it is important to note that Barad, in keeping with her empirical orientation, does not merely claim that any conception of presumptively prediscursive matter (such as the idea of biological sex targeted by Butler) is always-already discursive. Rather, the problem in Barad's view lies in the quality of the distinction between matter and discourse, which assumes separate physical and linguistic realms that pre-exist the distinction's operationalization in a specific context: experimental, discursive, or normally some complex concatenation of the two. Though nature and culture, or matter and discourse, are not precisely the same thing for agential realism, they have no existence as separate entities before a particular iterative enactment of their relation is put in place. "What is needed," Barad writes, "is an analysis that enables us to theorize the social and the natural together [. . .] in a way that clarifies the relationship between them."[11] Though its component poles are inseparable in

10 Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity," 125.

11 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 25.

an absolute sense, the matter/discourse distinction retains its truth value within specific, localized empirical contexts.

These last contentions inform what Barad wants to convey through her key notion of intra-action. Whereas modern science has classically conceived of physical matter as composed of networks of relations between preformed entities or objects, agential realism engages a number of perplexing natural phenomena to demonstrate a fundamental "ontological indeterminacy": the notion, that is, that nature is composed not of discrete things, but rather of "entanglements" of an awesomely complex "spacetimematter" that finally invalidates the conventional distinction between *phusis* and its media.[12] For Barad, this compound concept that goes without the intuitive idea of object radically undermines "the foundational notions of classical ontology,"[13] including most consequentially its account of causality. Defining intra-action as "the mutual constitution of entangled agencies,"[14] Barad rejects both the classical atomic parcellation of matter as well as unidirectional and determinate causal relations.

From a psychoanalytic perspective indebted to Copjec's work, we can say that agential realism's blind spot is to be located neither in its iterative account of discourse/matter relations nor in its performative view of matter's mediation in space and time. Rather, the problem lies in its silent and indeed comparatively classical assumption that both *phusis* and discourse, however inconsistent or indeterminate, are consistently so; that is, that they are not divided from themselves by an unplaceable negativity that renders even the determination of their indeterminacy uncertain. In sum, being is not merely indeterminate, as agential realism would contend; more consequentially, it is *incomplete*: thwarted by a lack that distorts and undermines its very realization. As I develop below, the consequence of agential realism's overhasty judgment of a generalized material indeterminacy—a determinate indeterminacy, you could also say—is the empiricist neo-objectivism that informs its inability to conceive of 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.

---

12 Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity," 125.

13 Barad, 125.

14 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 33.

Now this cursory overview will already have alerted readers attuned to evidence of the unconscious that agential realism's unqualified hostility to the properly *a priori* premise of a relationality between identifiable objects puts it at odds with not only psychoanalysis, but also the structuralist linguistics from which it also, via Derrida, takes inspiration. To be sure, from Freud's *Vorstellungsrepräsentanzen* to Lacan's signifiers and letters, psychoanalysis has relied on a conviction in the existence of discrete entities, however defined by difference and therefore incapable of forming a unified whole, of a properly signifying nature. Moreover, these entities leave their mark on all possible knowledge of nature, even if we grant that this nature, "in itself" as it were, is indeed devoid of identifiable objects as such. In the spirit of Barad's empiricism, we might call these minimal unities upon which psychoanalysis insists *quanta of "signifyingness"* (as opposed to "signification": too defined and final a term), and they do in fact enter, however problematically or precariously, into relations amongst themselves of the kind Barad wants to dismiss as unempirical: controverted, in other words, by the findings of contemporary science. To illustrate what might be lost to our conception of scientific knowledge as well as its causality in this post- or anti-semiotic orientation of thought, we can take as a context-defining example Barad's discussion of a recent controversy in the world of microbiology, as well as the more in-depth empirical research on which it is based.

Agential Realism and Microbiology

Pfiesteria piscicida is a predatorial, normally unicellular dinoflagellate whose claim to scientific fame is its capacity to behave as both plant and animal, exhibiting both photosynthetic capacity and heterotrophic behaviour (i.e., they eat other organisms). It drew the attention of microbiologists during the 1990s when questions emerged about its likely involvement in massive fish kills in the coastal estuaries of North Carolina. The characteristics and behaviours of these mixotrophic creatures, so called because of their confounding duality, varies in accordance with environmental vicissitudes. For example, they reproduce sexually *or* asexually depending on external conditions. The difficulty of squaring the organism's traits with existing microbiological categories led most researchers to the conclusion that science lacks the knowledge required to pin down its nature precisely. Going against the grain, Barad enlists for support the work of collaborator and science studies scholar Astrid Schrader, who rightly argues that the taxonomic conundrum reflects an uncertainty that pertains not to our

limited knowledge, but rather to the being of the critter itself. "Its very species being is indeterminate," Barad writes, with the consequence that the organism's "*epistemological uncertainty*" must be reconceived as a properly "*ontological indeterminacy*."[15] This pivot in Barad's discussion from epistemology to ontology is characteristic of agential realism's more general contention that the consequences of contemporary scientific practice refigure questions related to the limits of knowledge as assertions concerning being's inherent indeterminacy.

The key information provided to illustrate the congenital vagueness of the organism's species-being is the predatorial attribute indicated by its scientific name: *piscicida*; it kills fish. As it turns out, however, *Pfiesteria* only kills fish if it has previously been exposed to them. This means that its toxicity cannot be predicted by a thorough synchronic (atemporal or ahistorical) study of its environmental conditions. In Schrader's words, "the dinos act differently towards fish depend[ing] on how recently they have been in contact with [them]," and Barad concludes from this that the organisms "do not respond to deterministic models of causality."[16] Additional factors contribute to the difficulty of establishing the dinoflagellate's identity as well as its suspected role in the fish kills. Not only does *Pfiesteria* have twenty-four distinct life stages and three life forms—flagellated, amoeboid and encysted—but it has proven impossible to determine which of these stages are inherent and which are context-dependent.

The important corollary of this indeterminacy is that no rigorous distinction can be drawn between the organism and its environment insofar as this environment will alter the fundamental characteristics upon which taxonomic determinations are customarily made in microbiological discourse. Adding to the conundrum is the fact that laboratory practice has struggled to catch *Pfiesteria* in the act of killing: They are nowhere to be found in the fish they presumably kill, and soon after a kill the toxic zoospores morph into benign cysts. Further, because the zoospores rely on endosymbiotic bacteria for energy, they cannot be isolated from other organisms and therefore are not amenable to development in the pure cultures upon which microbiology conventionally relies to establish

15 Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity," 134; emphasis in original.

16 Quoted from Schrader's unpublished draft in Barad, 136. Schrader's argument concerning the *Pfiesteria* controversy, which extends well beyond Barad's use of it as an example of agential realism, will be considered in more detail below.

toxicity experimentally. And finally, on the assumption that *Pfiesteria* do indeed kill fish, microbiologists have thus far even failed to determine how they do it: by secreting a water-soluble neurotoxin or by physically attacking their victims, for example.

For Barad and company, this is the ethical consequence of all these experimental and taxonomic complications: Laboratory practice must elaborate models and procedures that allow for the "agential performances of the organism,"[17] taking care, that is, not to impose classically deterministic models of causality on phenomena involving patterns of intra-action between organism and environment so complex that they call into question the very distinction. Sceptical readers might wonder already why the argument lends so much weight to these classical models that rely on immediacy, synchronicity, or direct consequential action; why intra-action, in other words, is opposed so selectively to alternative models of causality including, for example, those involving diachronic delays or, more significantly from a psychoanalytic point of view, retroaction (a "backwards" causality that impacts the conceptualization of a prior reality).[18]

Indeed, when it comes to defining the properties of this intra-active causality, the discussion noticeably struggles. We read for instance that the choices on offer to understand what is at stake in explaining *Pfiesteria*'s alleged toxicity "are not simply deterministic causality, acausality, or no causality."[19] I take this to mean that if the variety of causality in question is not deterministic—if, in other words, toxicity cannot be established in accordance with conventional epidemiological criteria[20]—then the classical category is not simply inappropriate to the *Pfiesteria* phenomenon, and there remains some manner of causal relation between the organism and the kills. But the indeterminate causality brought

17 Barad, 137.

18 To be fair, Schrader's consideration of the causality involved in the fish kills is significantly more complex than what Barad's summary allows. Nonetheless, Schrader does wind up endorsing the same model of causality premised on generalized indeterminacy that Barad develops in her theoretical account of agential realism.

19 Barad, 136.

20 According to the classical, now in places discredited, guidelines known as Koch's Postulates, the infectious organism must be present in the affected host and then isolated and grown in pure culture. This culture must induce the disease again when introduced into a new, healthy host and then, isolated a second time, be shown to be the same organism as the one found in the original host.

forward by agential realism as an alternative to the classical models operates without assuming the existence of discrete objects in matter and for this reason forbids any notion of an autonomous and identifiable cause.[21]

Now a concept of causality that fails to distinguish categorically between cause and effect will surely appear suspect to many, including psychoanalytic readers. But why, precisely? One way of exploring this question is to investigate the divergent ways in which agential realism and psychoanalysis consider what Barad calls a "cut." Essential to agential realist doctrine is the distinction it draws between indeterminate matter "in itself" and the localized performative subject-object or social-natural resolutions that a particular experimental apparatus or measuring technology will put into effect on the level of the phenomenon. In other words, though agential realism rejects the existence of discrete entities in matter as such, it allows for these entities' phenomenal existence at the local level of a specific set of experimental conditions. The scientific apparatus, in other words, will enact iterative determinations of phenomenal objects and, though Barad's conception of laboratory practice includes discourse and meaning within its orbit, these factors, on the rare occasion when their agency is given pride of place, always act in tandem with the more commonsensically "material" workings of experimental technologies and practices.

Whereas agential realism accounts for the creation of objects of matter/knowledge via a hybrid conception of the experimental apparatus with which these objects are "agentially" enmeshed, psychoanalysis instead focuses squarely on the (dysfunctional) productive power of language and discourse, which are marked most consequentially not by indeterminacy, but rather by an inherent lack. This lack of closure in language, this negativity between signifiers, causes *not* the phenomenon's determination as in agential realism's lab practices, but rather the *subject of science* whose desires, both conscious and unconscious, will inevitably shape not only any possible experimental design, but also the interpretation of the data that the experiment will generate. Indeed (and quite preposterously from a psychoanalytic perspective), Barad's theory, in its aim to salvage a form of scientific objectivity from the ravages of poststructuralist relativism, explicitly disconnects the measured properties of a phenomenon from

[21] Barad, 149.

"the desires or will of the experimenter."[22] As I argue in this essay's conclusion, this allergy to the subject as psychoanalysis defines it (as a properly unconscious subject) leads agential realism to elaborate an ethics in which, contradictorily, binding normative judgments concerning the comparative value of scientific initiatives are forbidden in a squarely relativistic way.

With the indeterminacy it posits as the hallmark of discourse and spacetimematter's complex mutual entanglements, agential realism leaves the independent determinations of language, and ultimately language's inherent determinative failure, unacknowledged. As far as the *Pfiesteria* controversy is concerned, science requires a signifier quite literally to create the object of knowledge whose relative degree of correspondence to the microbiological phenomena under observation might then be put up for debate. This act of creation is the purely semiotic "cut" that psychoanalysis would posit in lieu of the phenomenal one performed by the experimental apparatus in agential realism. As Barad's and Schrader's considerations make abundantly clear, microbiologists have struggled to know exactly what they are talking about in their learned discussions of *Pfiesteria*. Nevertheless, the existence of a signifier in language to signify the microorganism in an objective way is necessary even if its actual or presumed ontological indeterminacy conditions the discussion as such and, further, even if this signification can only materialize differentially in relation to all the other taxonomic signifiers for related organisms in the discourse of microbiology.

In this precise sense, a variety of scientific objectivity—purely nonempirical in nature—is to be situated at the level of the signifier, not in the local phenomenal determinations effected by technologies of measurement. Whereas agential realism posits an entangled, mutually affecting relation between discourse and matter, psychoanalysis, in its dual emphasis on the autonomous material creativity of language and language's structural incompletion, gestures towards a view of nature itself as inherently lacking, of being as constitutively incomplete. What Barad calls *Pfiesteria*'s performativity should therefore be situated in the act of naming that retroactively creates its species-being in scientific discourse, however empirically problematic, not in the spatially and temporally mediated material nature whose relations with discourse in agential realism are left causally (and casually) ill-defined.

[22] Barad, "Meeting the Universe Halfway," 19.

The Dinoflagellate's Demand

Schrader's in-depth account of the microbiological research into the *Pfiesteria* controversy offers a level of nuance that Barad's exemplificatory use of it is unable to provide. Its consideration here will bring welcome precision to our discussion of the ethical and political ramifications of agential realism. The main interest of Schrader's exacting article is to gauge how responsibility in scientific practice is impacted by what she calls the "temporalization" of the scientific object.[23] Before considering the ethical question, however, it will be helpful to note how Schrader's analysis broaches the problem of discourse's role in the construction of epistemological objects with a view to fleshing out the subtle but consequential differences between agential realism and psychoanalysis on this issue.

As Schrader outlines, *Pfiesteria*'s species identity can be established with the help of available genetic testing technology. However, the markers singled out in such testing feature in both toxic and nontoxic populations of the organism and therefore fail to pin down its perplexing indeterminacy. The discordance between a genetically defined identity and the absence of any common characteristics or behaviours that remain invariant in space and time motivates Schrader's criticism of the numerous experiments that have "construct[ed] the essence of *Pfiesteria*'s being as an atemporal object," or as a determinate one in the broader context of agential realist theory.[24] On this basis, Schrader concludes that *Pfiesteria* is devoid of an ontological identity that would pre-exist the establishment of the laboratory apparatus's spatiotemporal parameters. This insight allows Schrader to acknowledge the power of taxonomic discourse to define the organism according to microbiological convention. Her discussion even recognizes that the act of scientific naming establishes identity negatively through differential relations to other taxonomic categories: "Without connection to anything established," she writes, "a new species, genus and family would cease to be meaningful."[25]

[23] Astrid Schrader, "Responding to *Pfiesteria piscicida* (the Fish Killer): Phantomatic Ontologies, Indeterminacy, and Responsibility in Toxic Microbiology," *Social Studies of Science* 40, no. 2 (April 2010): 278.

[24] Schrader, 287.

[25] Schrader, 289.

Clearly, however, Schrader's argument for taxonomic contingency is not what proves problematic from the perspective of *Read My Desire*'s critique of historicism. Rather, the difficulty arises from the specific ontological consequences she draws from it. For the conundrum around *Pfiesteria*'s identity and toxicity is the result of neither a misrecognition of the phenomenal impacts of experiment-specific spatiotemporal relations nor a hypostatization of the organism's identity via the idealist abstraction of its being from what Schrader calls its "doings." Since, due to the agency of discourse, any post-experimental interpretation of the data—necessarily discursive, of course, even if rendered mathematically—will retroactively posit the identity of the organism in question, there will always be friction, a disjunction, between the empirical evidence and the taxonomic definition of scientific objects like *Pfiesteria* that do not yet, and may never, exhibit either consistently verifiable inherent characteristics or environment-independent behaviours.

Crucially, these interpretations will inevitably insert the organism in question, figured in the form of a signifier/knowledge object, into a discourse that features an element of subjectivity tethered (unconsciously) to a particular ideological point of view.[26] In short, for the human subject of science—the desiring subject of which agential realism can only fail to take account—discourse inserts a gap into physical matter that lends to its epistemological objects not a generically knowable indeterminacy, but rather an identity that subverts itself, a unity that fails fully to come to be. This dynamic—or dialectic, properly speaking—of identity and its immanent subversion raises the question, in its relation to subjectivity, of science's desire. This desire's expression 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.

[26] Critical theory, a discourse with which Barad's thought does not substantively engage, makes a very similar point about "traditional" theory's confusion of two questions: "the mediation of the factual through the activity of society as a whole, and [. . .] the influence of the measuring instrument, that is, of a particular action, upon the object being observed." Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Mathew J. O'Connell et al. (New York: Continuum, 2002), 201. Both pre-critical theory and agential realism effectively isolate the latter from the former, as if experimental design had nothing to do with a socially and subjectively mediated selection of what agential realism itself calls "matters of concern." More simply put, the scientist will "concentrate on some particulars while failing to notice others." Horkheimer, 201.

To further explore the ethical and political consequences of this key question of science's desire, we can return to Barad's and Schrader's presentations of the social contexts surrounding the fish kills. To be sure, the sense in which agential realism should be qualified as an empiricist or scientistic variety of historicism must be set against, however paradoxical this might at first appear, properly contextual considerations. As we have already seen, the microbiological inquiry into *Pfiesteria* came on the heels of an ecological disaster involving more than a billion dead fish in North Carolina's coastal estuaries. Though no definitive or incontrovertible evidence has ever been produced, *Pfiesteria piscicida* figured as the prime suspect for the triggering of the red tides whose toxicity was hypothesized as the carnage's cause. The expanding corpus of scientific knowledge about the confounding organism was catalyzed in the first instance by a desire to stem the devastation of North Carolina's coastal fish stocks and to mitigate the severe economic consequences for the fishery and the livelihoods of the many who depend on it.

If the set of progressive and humanistic initiatives undertaken to stem the devastation of the red tides can be qualified as a desire, however, it is probably not an unconscious one. Turning to psychoanalysis, we can speculate about the desiring latencies inherent in agential realism's reading of *Pfiesteria* discourse by focusing on Barad's association of queerness with what she calls the "critter," the general concept that her consideration of Schrader's work aims to exemplify. As is well known, Lacan's rigorous definition of desire's causality references what he called *objet petit a*: a strangely negative, "anticonceptual and indefinite"[27] object distinct from both *phusis* and the signifier (and in this sense neither material/physical nor discursive) that retroactively produces, as we have already considered, an object of knowledge for scientific inquiry: the concept that differentially designates *Pfiesteria*'s confounding species-being. What then causes science itself to coin, to invent, this signifier? To put the same question a different way: What is the desire that drives microbiological interest in the dinoflagellate? And finally, what desire can we read between the lines of Barad's recruitment of *Pfiesteria* to serve as the symbol of an inherent queerness in nature?

In answering these questions, we might wonder if Barad's definition of the critters she lovingly describes might reveal—if not for Barad "herself" (surely this

[27] Lacan, *Les quatre concepts*, 30; my translation.

would be too psychologizing a reading), then for microbiology as agential realism figures it—properly psychical, as opposed to empirical, traits. As far as the science itself is concerned, considered apart from agential realism's consideration of it, we can ask this question: If microbiology has been so interested in pinning down the authentic species-being of so taxonomically confounding and seemingly destructive a creature, could this be because it wonders, unconsciously of course, what we as a species could be *for it*? If this hypothesis has any merit, then it should be possible to trace in Barad's discourse distinctive incarnations of the critter-object that signal both the idealized form it takes in the ego structure as well as a more nefarious mode that threatens to undermine that structure's stability from within. To what extent does the idealization of *Pfiesteria* as the material embodiment of a "queer" indeterminacy in nature (including its political consequences for human sexuality) depend on the repression of the discursive conditions for agential realism's relative degree of interest in the social and environmental impacts of its likely toxicity?

We can discern the former, idealized incarnation of *Pfiesteria* in the way Barad's discourse appeals to empirical evidence from the natural world in political defense of the legitimacy of a human form of queerness even if, as someone like Tim Dean would be sure to argue, that queerness's connection in the discussion to the lived experience of human sexuality remains contingent and vague.[28] Not only does the category of the critter muddle the distinction between human and animal, animate and inanimate, but it also unsettles the ontological identity of the conception of nature itself which, in the human world, serves as the rhetorical foundation for the well-known normative constructs responsible for

[28] I have in mind Dean's (justly) withering review of Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman's *Sex, or the Unbearable* in which he argues that the authors indulge in such abstractly theoreticist musings that sex's connection to anything related to lived experience becomes impossible to discern. See "No Sex Please, We're American," *American Literary History* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 614–24. Compare Alenka Zupančič's defence of a properly intellectual view of sex in her incisive inquiry into the unsettling ontological consequences of the psychoanalytic approach to the question in *What* Is *Sex?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017). In my own view, though psychoanalysis very clearly (and radically) problematizes the reduction of sex to the common-sense understanding of sexual practice, there remains a link between the theoretical or philosophical assertion of sex's connection to a fault in being and the contested, contradictory, and confusing meanings taken by the term in ordinary discourse, not to mention the many difficulties the lived experience of sexuality poses for individuals. I would add that the latter two are a direct consequence of the first.

the phobic acts of abjection that Barad's discourse rightly maligns. In short, there is a kind of transferential identification onto *Pfiesteria* on the very level of its species indeterminacy—a paradoxical supposition of knowledge of being's non-identity "in" the dinoflagellate—that works to cancel the traces of the organism's malignancy from the enunciation of Barad's "queer performative" account of its implication in the ecological disaster involving the red tides.

Barad's elevation of the microorganism into an emblem for politically meaningful queerness sidelines any normative acknowledgment of the environmental crisis that set off the scientific interest in its probable toxicity. Moreover, crucially for the question of causality, this idealization also obscures the dissimulated passivity characteristic of the unconscious subject of microbiology with respect to its epistemological project to define the organism's essence and establish its toxicity experimentally. Unconsciously as it were, microbiology, not to mention agential realism's engagement with it, asks these questions: In allegedly contaminating our waters, what could *Pfiesteria* be after? What nefarious design could possibly motivate the organism to kill so many nutrient-rich and delicious fish? In the end, the object-cause of the agential realist's desire in its microbiological manifestation is the non-phenomenal, *a priori* difference that structures the properly psychical distinction between the good critter whose queerness reveals what is excluded by the conditions of materialization, thereby providing validation for the lifestyle or identity of the human queer, and the bad critter whose probable if uncertain toxicity threatens the viability of our natural environment. The idealization of *Pfiesteria* in Barad's discourse—the abstraction of its "queerness" from its probable toxicity—marginalizes the social and environmental contexts of the scientific controversy, subsuming the concern for ecological destruction under the overriding ethical imperative to witness this organism's iterative morphs and phantomatic being.

Pivotal details of Schrader's scrupulous work on *Pfiesteria* can serve further to illustrate this dynamic of dissimulated subjective passivity which, as I have proposed, informs agential realism's ethical relativism and scientistic neo-objectivism. The status of *Pfiesteria* as a distinctively psychical object emerges most clearly when the microorganism is figured as issuing to science *a demand*: that it enable the organism's autonomy with respect to the constraining designs and determining machinations of (unethical) laboratory practice. In this way, Shrader's doctrinal call for what she calls "response-ability" obscures the effects of

microbiology's properly subjective desire by equating scientific ethics with this gesture of recognition rather than with, for example, a self-reflexive interrogation of the aims and impacts of investigation, or else a normative judgment about which matters of concern would be most beneficial to the human community and the broader ecological systems in which it is enmeshed.[29]

In an illuminating passage, Schrader enlists Derrida's much commented-upon motif of the phantom to describe *Pfiesteria*'s confounding properties. The prose divulges the logical connection in agential realism between, on the one hand, its ill-defined assumptions about the creative agency of language and, on the other, the ambition of objectivity or neutrality that underpins its scientistic methodological relativism. Averring that the phantom appears only as a trace in accordance with the investigative priorities operationalized by a specific experimental apparatus, Schrader emphasizes science's pre-eminent ethical duty to acknowledge the power of microbiological organisms to self-actualize:

> Phantoms do not emerge 'as such'; they appear as traces and are associated with specific matters of concern. Importantly, a phantom is not an empty signifier, whose meaning is simply deferred until the controversy may become settled. Phantoms are 'agentially real'; they contribute to their own materialization and *make demands on us* to be accounted for. Responsibility in scientific practices hinges on *how* their 'agencies' are taken into account.[30]

The first thing to note in this key passage is the assumption that to consider *Pfiesteria* as a signifier implies—with seeming necessity; analytically in Kantian terms—that science will one day find an associated signified that would fully disclose the microorganism's being. The psychoanalytic argument, by contrast, is notably subtler: If a signifier, in its differential relations with other signifiers, contains within itself the promise of completed meaning, then this meaning will always fail to disclose itself in full. In this sense, the signifier marks truth as impossible, amenable only to partial revelation. Instead, for agential realism, to argue that the invention of a taxonomic name creates a properly epistemological object is to assume (mistakenly) the eventuality of this object's complete saturation by knowledge and in consequence the imminence of a reliable ontological

[29] Schrader, "Responding to *Pfiesteria piscicida*," 277.

[30] Schrader, 279; emphasis added.

ground. The argument moves directly from its semiological premise to an epistemological consequence already conjoined with the unproblematized "classical" ontology that agential realism, rightly of course, rejects.

Indeed, Schrader will explicitly dismiss an alternative corollary to the idea of the signifier's creative epistemological power, the one that more accurately captures the consequences of discursive agency in scientific inquiry. Her work distinguishes between its own agential realist doctrine of ontological indeterminacy and a rival view of "epistemological uncertainties" that issue forth from the "incompleteness of human knowledges."[31] Evidently, the premise of epistemological incompleteness for agential realism carries no properly ontological consequences. Or if it does (as Schrader elsewhere will also suggest), these consequences can only be thoroughly classical, grounded in the same ontology of presence—pure, self-present being; or, in the microbiological context, a perfectly defined critter-essence—that Derrida thoroughly eviscerated in his deconstructive project.

The second notable element of the passage is of course the ethical consequence drawn from agential realism's indeterminate ontology. To be sure, a psychoanalytically-inclined reader cannot fail to note how the discussion portrays responsible experimental practice as a response to a demand from an Other: a microorganism, in this instance, endowed with the capacity to morph and materialize of its own volition and thereby to frustrate the designs of a classical model of empirical inquiry that assumes neatly divisible matter and distinct empirical objects. Yet this assertion of *Pfiesteria*'s prodigious agency is not precisely what is historicist in Shrader's discussion from the point of view of Copjec's critique. Instead, the argument runs aground where it equates scientific objectivity with a gesture of passivization that occludes the subjective function. Agential realism effects this occlusion by positioning microbiological inquiry as the instrumental satisfaction of *Pfiesteria*'s demand that any experimental engagement dutifully enable, witness, and account for its category-defying feats of self-materialization.

If such an act of witnessing is the paramount ethical responsibility of laboratory practice in agential realism, then there can be no legitimate normative

[31] Schrader, 283.

prioritization of any one set of concerns over any other. Though both Schrader and Barad make significant gestures in the direction of the importance of the human and ecological factors associated with the fish kills, their arguments" subsumption of inquiry to the microorganism's sovereignty prevents them, strictly speaking, from claiming these as especially worthy of investigative attention. Granted, Schrader's analysis will nicely foreground the strange, future anterior temporality involved in establishing the repeatability of the kills attributed to *Pfiesteria* when their involvement can only be established after the fact through the observation of their inherited toxicity in laboratory conditions. When the assertion about this temporality's ecological and political relevance is made, however, it is left unspecified, evoked only as one of many possible matters of concern in which scientific inquiry might take an interest.[32]

Indeed, a lay observer—not to mention a worker who depends on the viability of the estuarine fish stocks—might suggest that an investigation into the impacts of industrial agricultural runoff, especially the contaminants produced by the pork and poultry industries, might be an especially urgent matter of concern that merits methodological foregrounding.[33] Some might even confess to harbouring no ethical concerns over an inquiry that would prioritize the generation of evidence of these impacts over the respectful acknowledgement of *Pfiesteria*'s powers of self-transformation. By figuring the phenomenal ambiguity of the protist's ambiguous being as a demand for ethical acknowledgment that must be satisfied, agential realism relativizes—and thereby discourages—interrogation of the desire of science, including the properly political question of the vested human interests that will always inform experimental design.

In the end, the indeterminate causality that informs agential realism fails to depart substantively from the Derrida- and Foucault-inspired deconstructive-historicist framework that has so influentially informed Butler's work, from which Barad and company will draw significantly while at the same time critiquing it for its inability to move beyond the social realm to inquire into its intra-active relations with matter. Even though, through their inquiry into the epistemological

[32] Schrader, 296.

[33] For important context around the continuing impact of industrial agricultural runoff on North Carolina's coastal estuaries, see Rick Dove's *Riverlaw* website: https://www.riverlaw.us.

and ontological consequences of contemporary empirical science, Barad and Schrader meaningfully augment Butler's theory by including *phusis* within the realm of what avails itself of performative self-materialization, their conceptions of both discourse and matter remain "realtight" in Copjec's specific sense: However indeterminate (because they are susceptible only to phenomenal subject/object or nature/culture localizations), they remain consistently so, devoid of the lack, the negativity, for which the subject must inevitably compensate through the agency—the *performative* agency, why not?—not of an intra-active discourse/matter amalgam, but rather of fantasy and the unconscious desire that molds it.

Left unaccounted for in agential realism is the strange causal agency of a properly psychical object irreducible to both *phusis* (nature) and language (the signifier). This object is included within what we might call, in an expansion of Barad's Germanesque compound term, *"spacetimematterdiscourse"* only as its internal limit, as its exteriority to itself. The regrettable ethical consequence of this oversight is the unacknowledged subjective passivity that subjugates scientific responsibility to both environment and human community to an imperative of microbiological recognition. This imperative is enabled by a gesture of "queer" idealization that dangerously relativizes the political and ecological consequences of *Pfiesteria*'s likely toxicity, delinking through abstraction the idea of queerness from the lived experience of human sexuality.

Data availability statement

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

References

Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

———. "Nature's Queer Performativity." *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (January 2011): 121–58.

Copjec, Joan. *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. London: Verso, 2015.

Dean, Tim. "No Sex Please, We're American." *American Literary History* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 614–24.

Dove, Rick. Riverlaw. https://www.riverlaw.us.

Horkheimer, Max. *Critical Theory: Selected Essays by Max Horkheimer*. Translated by Mathew J. O'Connell et al. New York: Continuum, 2002.

Lacan, Jacques. *Je parle aux murs*. Paris: Seuil, 2012.

——. *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*. Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 11. Paris: Seuil, 1973.

Miller, Jacques-Alain. "Docile to Trans." Translated by Philip Dravers, Pamela King and Peggy Papada. *The Symptom* 18. https://www.lacan.com/symptom/docile-to-trans-by-jacques-alain-miller.

Schrader, Astrid. "Responding to *Pfiesteria piscicida* (the Fish Killer): Phantomatic Ontologies, Indeterminacy, and Responsibility in Toxic Microbiology." *Social Studies of Science* 40, no. 2 (April 2010): 275–306.

Varoufakis, Yanis. *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism*. Brooklyn: Melville House, 2023.

Zupančič, Alenka. *What* Is *Sex?* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017.

Filozofski vestnik
ISSN 0353-4510 | Volume 46 | Number 2 | 2025 | 67–92
 | DOI: 10.3986/FV.46.2.03

Fernanda Negrete*

Breast and the Jetty: On Traversing Anxiety

Keywords
anxiety, the breast, desire, originary fantasy, the future, GIFRIC, psychosis

Abstract
This essay explores a possible traversal of anxiety in dialogue with Chapter 5 of Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire*, "Vampires, Breastfeeding, and Anxiety." At stake in this traversal is an act of freedom that opens up a future for the human. Starting with the play of Freudian resonances in Copjec's title, "Breast and the Jetty" plays, in turn, as an echo of "Death and the Maiden" that enables an analysis of fantasy as a solution to castration anxiety in the neurotic, which has the effect of circumscribing desire. Analyses of the problematics of the breast as partial object and object cause of desire and of the "forbidden woman" Copjec locates in Chris Marker's *La Jetée* emphasize a shift from Lacanian theory, centered on the symbolic, to Willy Apollon's recent metapsychology, developed from GIFRIC's clinic for the treatment of psychosis in Quebec. By attending to this work, and to the nuances of originary fantasy Lucie Cantin offers, I discern the qualities of an unfettered quest of desire, independent from the conditions of neurotic fantasy and capable of confronting a future for which there is no reference in language.

Dojka in pomol: o prekoračitvi tesnobe

Ključne besede
tesnoba, dojka, želja, izvorna fantazma, prihodnost, GIFRIC, psihoza

Povzetek
Prispevek raziskuje možnost prekoračitve tesnobe v dialogu s petim poglavjem knjige Joan Copjec *Read My Desire*, »Vampirji, dojenje in tesnoba«. Pri tej prekoračitvi gre za dejanje svobode, ki človeku odpira prihodnost. Medtem ko v naslovu zadevnega

* University at Buffalo, State University of New York, Buffalo, USA
fnegrete@buffalo.edu | https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6723-3349

poglavja iz Copjecine knjige odmeva naslov Freudovega spisa, pa v naslovu pričujočega članka »Dojka in pomol« odmeva naslov slike »Deklica in smrt«, ki nam omogoča analizo fantazme kot rešitve kastracijske tesnobe pri nevrotiku, kar ima za posledico omejitev želje. Analize problematike dojke kot delnega objekta in objekta-vzroka želje ter »prepovedane ženske«, ki jo Copjec najde v filmu Chrisa Markerja *Mesto slovesa*, izpostavi premik od lacanovske teorije, osredotočene na simbolno, k nedavni metapsihologiji Willyja Apollona, razviti v kliniki za zdravljenje psihoz GIFRIC v Quebecu. Iz obravnave tega dela in različic izvorne fantazme, ki jih ponuja Lucie Cantin, avtorica v članku razbere lastnosti nebrzdane težnje želje, ki ni odvisna od pogojev nevrotične fantazme in se lahko sooči s prihodnostjo, za katero v jeziku ni nobene reference.

∞

From Trimethylamine to the Navel

Freud's 1926 "Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety" is the echoed title in "Vampires, Breast-Feeding, and Anxiety," Chapter 5 of Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire*. Through Jean-Jacques Rousseau's and Mary Wollstonecraft's texts, however, "Vampires" and "Breast-feeding" both appear as symptoms of a culture preoccupied with the drying-up of the breast *qua* representative of submission to the social law.[1] While these authors disagreed about women's role in eighteenth-century society, both saw in breastfeeding mothers the key to a child's and a society's flourishing. Thinking of the French libertine tradition, more specifically of Lacan's work on the Marquis de Sade and ethics, Copjec briefly notes this is also a moment in history when the individual subject emerges as synonymous with "exalted evil" in libertine thought, in other words, as impossible "to integrate" into society. She further points out that this non-integration implies a "necessary interrelation" between subject and society, rather than their mere "external opposition."[2] The individual subject as the site of singular experience is indeed the central discovery these different thinkers respond to. For instance, although Rousseau would not see it as evil, he too suggests that an exalted excess inhabits the child, even when breastfed by a loving mother who protects it from becoming spoiled and secures strong ties amongst family members and in

1 Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (New York: Verso, 2015), 127.
2 Copjec, 124.

society.[3] It is because the individual subject is at once irreducible to society yet never fully decouplable from it that these articulations and positions regarding the law are theorized and explored as modes of human life.

When Freud, with his patients, invents psychoanalysis at the turn of the twentieth century, he relies on this dimension of individual experience that refuses to simply adapt to the social environment constraining the individual. For Copjec, both eighteenth-century encouragement of mothers to breastfeed and twentieth-century historicism—the textual methodology she pits against Lacanian theory—deeply fear the confrontation with the real. In the first case, however, the symbolic shielding against the real in a way recognizes this real, whereas the second case involves a foreclosure of the gap induced by the real, giving the historicist "a certain deafness, to the signal sounded by the dream."[4] The dream invoked here in relation to the signal of anxiety is none other than Freud's own dream of Irma's injection, where he peeks into Irma's mouth to encounter strange, disturbing forms that point back to his own body. Copjec proposes that Freud also turns away from anxiety, and that his triumphant limit against the anxiety this encounter provoked in him lies instead in the symbolic tactics of naming the substance he injects into Irma's body "trimethylamine."[5] But I would like to come back to what disturbs Freud in the open mouth. If this moment of self-reflection is uncanny, it is not merely because the image is of his unseemly nasal passages afflicted by cocaine use, but above all because it points to his own body as the source of an act with consequences for others. It is interesting to consider that this dream was not only crucial to inaugurating psychoanalysis, but also to marking out an intractable real as that which anxiety signals, the navel of the dream without which there simply is no dream in clinical terms. While "trimethylamine" is certainly symbolic—in Freud's analysis it points to Wilhelm Fliess' theory of sexual chemistry as well as to the friendship

3 Rousseau famously relates his lasting eroticized childhood experience of Mme. Lambercier's physical punishment, which he only refused to reproduce to avoid this maternal figure's moral disapproval. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, trans. Angela Scholar (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), 14–15.

4 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 125. Copjec presents Erikson and a female participant, who interprets the dream in pointing out the suffocating effect of women's clothing worn in Irma's time, as instances of the historicist position within the discussion around Freud's dream.

5 Copjec, 121.

between the two men—it is not the navel *per se*.[6] Like the subject of "exalted evil," the navel of the dream can neither be fully represented nor interpreted. It is the genuine site of the subject, which cannot be traced back to the social, unlike everything else in the dream. At this site, the signifier fails and yet the subject's singularity is mobilized to pass to the act precisely because nothing in language can support it.

Tracy McNulty has pointed out Freud's declared struggle regarding the patient who provoked the dream. On the one hand, he still hopes that informing Irma of her unconscious wishes fulfills his role, leaving her to accept them and thus become free from her symptoms. On the other hand, McNulty claims that "Freud is discovering for the first time that the patient is confronted with a real for which there is no name, about which she knows nothing, that is not an object of conscious knowledge."[7] It is thus at the place of the open mouth, McNulty notes, where Freud sees the terrifying forms reminiscent of illness and death, that he inserts a footnote to indicate the "navel of the dream," what has no signifier and is the dream's "point of contact with the unknown."[8]

This point of failure of the signifier is the site of an eventually possible act that does not fail and instead introduces and sustains a subject's desire in the world while assuming its consequences for that subject and for others. In his seminar on Freud's dream on March 16, 1955, Lacan highlights this site of chaos and loss of the subject in the dream to show that in analyzing his own dream Freud addresses himself to us, avowing his transgressive desire.[9] "No doubt the syringe was dirty," Lacan writes, ventriloquizing Freud, and emphasizing the contagious effect of his act of curing patients "who until now no one wanted to understand, and whose cure was forbidden."[10] McNulty in this regard proposes that Freud's analysis of his dream has the status of a true act of transmission,

6 Sigmund Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 4:116–17.

7 Tracy McNulty, "Untreatable: The Freudian Act and its Legacy," *Crisis and Critique* 6, no. 1 (2019): 226–51, 234.

8 Freud, "Interpretation of Dreams," 4:111n1.

9 Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), 170.

10 Lacan, 170.

with which his work as an analyst first of all confronts analysands, whose drive is called forth by the analyst's desire. If Freud's analysis of the dream can be seen as a "pass," it is "not so much because he manages to construct and put into words an unconscious logic, but because he emerges from the dream-analysis having accepted what is acting in him, as well as in his patients, rather than fearing or repudiating it."[11] In this sense, Freud's dream of Irma's injection inaugurates psychoanalysis as an experience of the body and introduces something new and different from the medical doctor-patient relation, and different from a psychotherapy, whose aim is instead to limit the confrontation with the real in its nameless and deadly quality. In other words, the work of an analysis is in this light inextricable from an encounter with and even an embrace of the cause of anxiety. But if an analysis "confronts [his] patients with death at its very core,"[12] traversing this experience of anxiety gives birth to the unfettered quest of desire.

It is the anxiety-inducing navel of the dream that confronts us with an ethical question. What is there to do with this thing that resists interpretation and which the dreamer alone must face? In his analysis of his dream, Freud realizes he is eluding responsibility for his desire as an analyst, the desire that provoked transference in other bodies and brought psychoanalysis into existence, a desire not represented by a medical commitment. Today, one hundred and thirty years after Freud introduced this dream to psychoanalysis, it is important to examine the offer made by the navel of dreams and therefore by psychoanalysis. For today takes place not only after Freud and Lacan but also in a time when the social contract—conceived by Rousseau and absorbed, like a dose of trimethylamine, by France to end monarchy and by the modern world to establish legitimate authority in its political communities—has lost credibility.

Like the mother's breast milk in Rousseau's and Wollstonecraft's views, "trimethylamine" in Copjec's reading of Freud operates as a shield, a safeguard against the *extimate* object and, specifically, its emergence as "a bodily double we can neither make sense of nor recognize as our own."[13] In such an encounter, the object—*per* Lacan's seminar on anxiety, wherein he enumerates the breast, the gaze, the voice, the phallus, and feces as the modes of the object-cause of

11 McNulty, "Untreatable," 238.
12 McNulty, 236.
13 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 128.

desire—emerges suddenly too close to remain a partial object sustaining the neurotic fantasy. In contrast, at the correct distance, "as a lost part of ourselves," where this loss is a condition for becoming a subject, this object "functions as the object-cause of our desire."[14] This allows Copjec to show us, in addition to the problem of the bodily double epitomized in Gothic literature in her own analysis, another problem.[15] This problem concerns the impossibility of a future, renounced in favor of "an unabandoned embrace of *jouissance*."[16] Copjec finds a great example of this problem in *La Jetée*, Chris Marker's 1964 postapocalyptic time-travel film, a photo-novel in the director's terms.[17] The jetty at Paris-Orly Airport is the site of a childhood memory revisited in the flesh by the adult protagonist, who runs toward the unabandoned embrace of a woman—and meets death before reaching her. Like the hero who falls as he rushes to join the woman from his past facing him at the end of the jetty, the fantasy also collapses as the distance, ◊, between the barred subject, $\not{S}$ and its object, *a*, disappears.

My own engagement with these insightful claims and with the example of *La Jetée* in this chapter from *Read My Desire* is based on a concern for the future that requires grappling with anxiety at the point where something important has happened not only to some individuals but to humanity as such. What happens is that the shield of the symbolic is no longer effective. Anxiety, which "gives a signal,"[18] is caused, Copjec writes, by "that which nothing precedes, that which follows from nothing."[19] In this regard she also points out Freud's wrestle with the causality of anxiety, where he tries to work out whether repression precedes anxiety, as he originally thought, or the other way around, and whether Otto Rank is right or not about there being, for the newborn, an anxiety of birth. I would say anxiety has to do with oddly approaching *something*, with an increasing proximity against which there is no shield and no refuge. Most often, this *something* functions as an object at once rejected and internalized to constitute oneself as subject, opening, Copjec suggests, the possibility of occasional uncanniness, when one comes too close to it. Yet in *La Jetée* it is not only a matter of encountering the feeling of the uncanny but also of reopening the foreclosed

14 Copjec, 129.
15 Among her examples is Wollestonecraft's daughter's masterpiece, *Frankenstein*.
16 Copjec, 131.
17 *La Jetée*, dir. Chris Marker (Argos Films, 1962).
18 Sigmund Freud, "Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety," in *Standard Edition*, 20:92.
19 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 118.

future. Anxiety thus sounds a signal of what is to come, though without offering any hints of what it might resemble, since it is exactly the lack of resemblance to anything that provokes this strange feeling. Both the symbolic and historicist solutions to anxiety react to the void of sense it confronts them with by turning away. Yet as Copjec importantly points out, "Freud does not simply flee from the unconscious or from the real of Irma's desire: *he holds on to them* [. . .]. [I]n its refusal to interpret [the unconscious and the woman's desire] psychoanalysis maintains them, for there where they are interpreted they cease to be."[20]

In *La Jetée*, wherein a Third World War has destroyed Paris and made most of the world uninhabitable due to intense levels of radiation, there is neither a social link nor a city in which to take shelter. Instead, there is a void, unbearable because it appears like a dead end. How to step forward, to pro*ject* oneself from this destruction into a future? Since there seems to be no way forward or beyond this dead end, the historicists turn away from this void and retreat to the resources of language and culture, resources accumulated to manage this defect and regain confidence in a world whose historical moment has exposed the point of failure of the signifier and the site of a possible act. Freud momentarily responds in this manner, as well (insofar as in his dream he attempts to place the blame for Irma's illness in the other doctor figures). In a way, *La Jetée*'s hero appears to perform the same maneuver, since he tries to escape into the past where he tries to rejoin a woman whose company he had enjoyed, in other words, to seek refuge in the ideal of the couple, where the woman is an object of satisfaction for a man. However, this solution renounces the future in its truly unprecedented quality, in favor of the familiar, or of a delimited creativity within "safe" boundaries. What makes Freud's dream in his own analysis ultimately side with unprecedented creativity, insofar as he inaugurates psychoanalysis, is that he recognizes in the flight to medical culture the truth that he has gone too far and that his unconscious desire is stronger than his ego within culture.

It is difficult 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. This emphasis on the inevitable and even essential confrontation of the void is in fact already present in Freud's dream of Irma's injection, as I have just discussed. In *La Jetée* those who, in the narrator's words, "believed themselves victors" of the

[20] Copjec, 123; emphasis in original.

war and ran a prisoner-of-war camp in the underground passages of the Chaillot Palace in Paris, seem to know this too.[21] This is why "the camp police spied even on dreams," we hear the voice-over narrate while we view the protagonist lying on a hammock, waiting to undergo a series of experiments. If this disposition is reminiscent of the analytic couch, the upright scientists poring over the subject of the experiment with bulky spectacles certainly are not analysts. As the protagonist learns, the scientists understand "the human race is doomed." No one, police or prisoner, is therefore above the problem described by the inventor addressing the man in terms of "space being closed off from humankind," leaving time as "the only link to the means for survival." Still, to save humanity, the scientists prefer to put prisoners rather than themselves through time-travel, whereas the analyst must go through their own analysis to eventually take up their position. Through trial and error (leaving trial subjects "disappointed, dead, or insane"), these scientists have learned that individuals "endowed with powerful mental images" are more likely to tolerate the intensity of the procedure. This detail highlights both the work of filmmakers capturing images at twenty-four frames per second as well as the deliberate use of still frames in *La Jetée*, stills which stress that the world has stopped. Yet, this detail also points to the question of irreducible individual subjectivity and its articulation to society. In the film's postapocalyptic situation it becomes clear that there will be no human life, no society without mobilizing exactly that which can never coincide with society in an individual, where the latter's subjectivity resides.

Thus, this detail and its ingenious portrayal in *La Jetée* lay bare the fact that to sustain the subject is to take the side of radical creativity. The capacity for mental images is not the product of anything observable in shared reality, even if these images are made from bits of that reality and even if exercising such a capacity requires the material support of a brain. If someone can be "endowed with powerful mental images" it is due to the work of the drive in that individual, which exceeds not only the present, but also what is given in perception and language. In the time-travel experiments featured in *La Jetée*, the protagonist "was chosen among a thousand others" in the prison camp. Yet if the idea of the gifted or endowed mind is admittedly evoked—for instance, in that this man unlike others can tolerate being torn away from the present without going mad or dying—what seems more relevant is the very capacity for mental images as constitutive of the

[21] In fact, this palace was built for the *Exposition Internationale* of 1937.

human, making possible experiences that are not locatable in space-time. The differences among prisoners have less to do with unequal levels in mental power, then, and more to do with the effects of such unobservable experiences for each one, and with their clash against the field of the Other where shared reality lies. In the protagonist's case, he is "fixated on an image of his past." He initially does not understand why this image had remained in or returned to his mind so intently, but it nonetheless provides an orientation for his quest.

Originary Fantasies

Like the protagonist perplexed by his own fixed memory in *La Jetée*, I also did not initially understand why, in following the rich thread of texts, figures, and images through which Copjec takes up the question of anxiety in her chapter, a surreal duo came to my mind: "Breast and the Jetty." Beyond the explicit textual/cinematic references in the chapter, the full sense of this couple escaped me. That is, why these two elements among the many others that could stand for the chapter's core, and given Copjec's own proposal of the chain "vampires, breastfeeding and anxiety"? And why would these two, not three, be linked by the conjunction "and"? Casting meaning aside, what I could discern from the outset was an echo of that well-known, centuries-old couple, "Death and the Maiden." One might visualize Hans Baldung Grien's 1517 painting or recall the *lied* and quartet Schubert composed three centuries later, in 1817 and 1824, respectively. Both manifest the urgency of death's foreboding call and its effect of terror over the maiden. In German, *Der Tod und das Mädchen* has masculine and neuter articles—*der*, *das*—for the two participants, whereas the English translation loses grammatical gender and drops the article before "Death" to sound idiomatic. One could say "The Breast and the Maiden," especially since "*the* breast" is, to a Lacanian ear, one of the possible forms of *objet a*, as mentioned. Without its article, "Breast" could indicate the start of the anamorphosis whereby the object shifts from its partial status to that of the vampire in Copjec's chapter, which she explains is "a complete body [. . .] whose distorted bodily form indicates its possession of a certain excess object: the breast once again, but this time as source of *jouissance*"[22]—much in the way that Death, too, emerges close to the maiden, almost too close to that youthful beauty, as "a body too much"[23] intent

[22] Copjec, 129.

[23] Copjec, 130.

on forming a couple that can never survive. In this sense, the couple "death and the maiden" precisely names a fantasy. Whose? "Death and the maiden, together," says death, pointing to the ground with one hand while pulling a lock of the maiden's hair with the other, under the words *hie must du yn*, "here you must go," in Baldung's painting. The maiden instead, pleading with hands pressed together in the painting, racing away in the quartet's first movement, seems to say, "Death or the maiden, it's you or me." "Leave me now alone!" she begs in the poem by Claudius Mathias that Schubert set to *lied*. It is also a fantasy for European culture. The beginning of this obsession with death and the maiden is often explained as an expression of the experience of extremely high mortality rates under the bubonic plague known as "The Black Death" (which peaked between 1347–1351) and its recurrences up to the eighteenth century. Of course, this traumatic historical event (resonant with our own post-Covid19 pandemic context), along with the wars and colonial expeditions, would put death on people's minds and in their dreams.

Yet it is essential to consider that, in the analytic sense, a fantasy responds to something irreducible to external circumstances, since it is a solution by which the subject covers up, in a highly specific way, castration and the failure of the signifier to support unconscious desire. This does not minimize historical traumas, but instead, I believe, takes the gap of the real seriously. The fantasy could coalesce in the sentence: "A beautiful maiden is courted passionately, lustfully, by a deadly lover." The *jouissance* of being the object of this courtship is tucked away, for one. Analysis is interested in exposing this inadmissible *jouissance*, and in confronting and facing castration, against which the fantasy is a last resort. However, this confrontation of lack is not only a matter of assuming, as a position, that the subject can neither be nor have *it all*. Assuming one's place in the symbolic is not the sole outcome of the analysis of the fantasy. This seems especially limited in an age when the cultures and civilizations that support symbolic life are so unstable and barely credible. In the context of the bubonic plague this fragilization would apply, as well, and the more elemental wish not to be annihilated is certainly expressed in Baldung's painting. This, in fact, prompts a distinction of modalities of the fantasy, since here it is less a matter of the price paid to enter language and the symbolic than of a primal confrontation with a deadly force, the image of death itself. Lucie Cantin explains that the originary fantasy "re-traces and represents the child's confrontation with the censored Thing in the body of the woman who is its mother," which the child experiences in its

body "as a danger, an anxiety, or a jouissance, in any case as something unmanageable for which nothing in what is said offers a way to face it."[24]

In Baldung's painting, the maiden's round, youthful body contrasts with horrifying, skeletal death behind her, driving her toward the abyss or the underworld. Her smooth and taut skin stands against his rough, ragged flesh; her body seems still, except for the tears on her face, whereas he seems to march effortlessly, dragging her in the direction he points to, down and out of the frame's lower left side.[25] What would it mean for the maiden to traverse this fantasy? The image indicates that the two figures' physical separation would involve cutting the maiden's long hair, since it is by a lock that death's hand holds on to her. But then the maiden would run away only until she is caught again, dragged back to where she must inevitably go. This scene offers no traversal.

The only way out of this deadlock involves dismantling the Other of the originary fantasy, represented here by lustful Death. This work through the cause of anxiety and *jouissance* opens another, more radically emancipatory possibility, and what is fascinating to me about of the references Copjec invokes in relation to the anxiety of the uncanny concerns this very possibility. This emancipatory possibility involves a change of perspective on the "death (drive) and the (beautiful) maiden," one that allows the parenthetical elements in this conjunction to burst out to become the explicit and unrestricted agents of a different fate or vicissitude for desire than merely a premature end to the maiden's life. This shift opens a perspective on the death drive that is fundamentally creative, and in relation to this perspective, it renews a commitment to the beautiful—a feeling whose importance Copjec considers in her chapter, insofar as it supports the impossibility of saying and interpreting it all, and is therefore true to the cry to read a subject's unspoken desire.[26] The key to this commitment lies in Cantin's

---

[24] Lucie Cantin, "The Fantasy: Its Function and Modalities, Traversal and Clinic," in *A Psychoanalysis for a Reemergent Humanity: The Metapsychology of Willy Apollon*, ed. Lucie Cantin et al. (Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming).

[25] There is a sense of calm inevitability both in the painting and in the auditory presence of Death in Schubert's *lied*.

[26] Copjec refers to Lacan's use of Kant's conception of the beautiful in the *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. With regard to the Death and the Maiden couple it is interesting that, in his *Ethics* seminar, the beautiful "is the limit of the second death," and the function of the beautiful is "to reveal to us the site of man's relationship to his own death, and to reveal

account of the originary fantasy, which shifts the emphasis from language and symbolic castration towards the real, and particularly toward the censorship of the feminine. Cantin defines the feminine as a real outside-of-language that is the source of boundless creativity in each subject. The clinical wager is that, through an analysis, lifting this censorship put in place by a culture welcomes an expression of the feminine that can be aesthetic and make a space for the beautiful and the sublime beyond cultural and civilizational limits. This aesthetic space is therefore not equivalent to Lacan's understanding of love in his tenth seminar, where he defines it as "the sublimation of desire" and as "a cultural fact."[27] The aesthetic as an expression of the feminine is the realm in which it becomes possible to open the future, as a concern beyond individual survival, in its unprecedented quality.

We now have reference points to begin taking up "breast" (to then return to "jetty" via *La Jetée*, and hopefully discern something of their conjunction "and"). Lacan, after Freud and Melanie Klein, identifies the breast as a partial object correlative to the oral drive, and specifically as the infant's first object, from which it obtains *jouissance* through sucking and from which it will eventually wean itself. In Copjec's text the breast initially emerges in the previously mentioned context of political advocacy of breastfeeding, where breastfeeding mothers are seen as the basis of a healthy society, made up of citizens who are ready to act for collective unity as a priority over individual inclinations.[28] Copjec shows how this advocacy betrays an unrecognized anxiety that is captured by vampire fiction "in all its Gothic forms" as its equivalent.[29] Vampire fiction expresses the anxiety over "the disappearance of the fantasy support of desire."[30] Copjec finds in vampire fiction an image of anxiety's implicit fears over what Lacan described in his seminar as "the drying up of the breast"[31] by following his indication that vampirism is the image that expresses not only the infant's temporarily parasitic organism but the fantasy of the oral relation. Separating

it to us only in a blinding flash." Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 136, 260, 295.

27 Lacan, *L'angoisse*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 209–10; my translation.

28 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 127. In the preceding chapter of *Read my Desire*, however, Copjec highlights the fact that psychoanalysis refuses this belief as the key to happiness.

29 Copjec, 118.

30 Copjec, 128.

31 Lacan, *L'angoisse*, 272.

ourselves from the object is necessary to enter language, which, Copjec points out, implies internalizing it as *extimate*, as a stranger within. This makes us susceptible to encountering the uncanny, where the breast "no longer appears as a partial object."[32] In Lacan's reading, Freud's account stresses the weaning that results in the breast as lost when the child can see the whole person to whom the organ belonged, allowing the object to function as cause of desire. According to Copjec, however, the breasted vampire emerges as an excessive double of the victim, endowed with the object as a source of the *jouissance* sacrificed by the neurotic to enter language and constitute himself or herself within a social reality.[33] Here, again, the focus is on language and symbolic castration, occasionally unsettled by the uncanny vampire-image. Yet the oral drive and its object, the breast, latched onto with the lips, points to infancy, to a time before language in every human individual's existence, there where the subject is overwhelmed by the unnamable Thing in "the body of the woman who is its mother." I repeat this previously cited turn-of-phrase of Cantin's for its resistance to the reduction to "the mother," since it is precisely in that reduction that the censorship of the feminine in the woman occurs. Moreover, the Thing confronting the child and causing "fear, anxiety, or jouissance" consists in nothing other than the part of the woman unrelated to being a mother and, unlike motherhood, without an assigned place in social reality. In other words, the oral drive takes us beyond the two options of breastfeeding advocacy or vampire fiction as an example of the sporadic uncanny feeling, though showcasing the relevance of this third way will require some more steps in my exposition of what is at stake in the breast.

In his seminar on anxiety, Lacan repeatedly states that, in the case of the oral drive, the point of anxiety is in the field of the Other. The oral drive is therefore interesting, and different from other partial drives, insofar as it reveals something of the structure of anxiety concerning the articulation of the relation to the Other and libidinal satisfaction, as Clotilde Leguil explains.[34] The breast corresponds to this drive in that it is not only "plastered," as it were, to the body, and therefore detachable, like the other objects, but also, in that the child and the maternal subject do not have the same relation to the breast. Like the placenta, the breast is "an amboceptor," a term Lacan adopts to show not only an

32 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 129.

33 Copjec, 129.

34 Clotilde Leguil, "Le sein lacanien," *La cause du désir* 94, no. 3 (2016): 37.

organ for nutrimental exchanges, but the different ways in which it puts into play the cut for the child and the mother.[35] Consequently, the experience of lack for each subject is different and they do not correspond to each other. Reading "The Family Complexes in the Formation of the Individual" for this particular point, Leguil speaks of an "inaugural discomfort" that a mother simply cannot assuage, which can help her manage her feelings of insufficiency.[36] Yet in the interest of opening a different possibility for the breast, one can, returning to Cantin, glean the following: What may seem like a discomfort for the child provoked by lack is also the trace of subjective freedom and creative potential. In other words, the inaugural cut represented first by separation from the placenta and then by weaning from the breast concerns a loss of environmental limits conditioning the organism's life, and therefore the mobilization of the drive, inaugurating a body in the analytic sense, as a fundamentally singular inscription.[37] Just as the censored *jouissance* in the body of the woman who is the child's mother could not possibly be satisfied by the child, so is there a dimension of the child's cry that does not correspond to a mother's nourishment (or any Other's). That the cut does not pass at the same place for woman and child does not mean the child is not exposed to this *jouissance* in the woman's body, as I stated previously.

All this, however, is unconscious and unspoken. Moreover, not only is this unconscious and unspoken, but, as Cantin's account implies, there is simply no signifier for it in language. Moreover, these experiences and their unsatisfiable nature are necessarily ignored from the perspective of culture, which constructs the woman required for its material and ideological reproduction by censoring the feminine in her, subsuming it under an ideal of motherhood. Given these constraints, it is extremely common for a woman's femininity to remain censored under this cultural formatting, which affects the child. Cantin writes:

> [W]hat has not found expression of [the woman's] femininity and of the quest of desire will come to trap her relationship with her child. Motherhood in such circumstances remains caught up in an "address' to the child, a tacit demand for love, for reparation and recognition, in which something is expected of the

35 Leguil, 39.
36 Leguil, 39.
37 Cantin, "Fantasy."

> child through a series of unconscious expectations, acts, affective reactions, gestures—in short, a series of unspoken things that the child feels and responds to reluctantly.[38]

Hence, the child's response expresses the unique inscription of the drive in her or his body and the representation she or he makes of this experience in the originary fantasy.

The work of analysis is directed at lifting not only the repressed, that is to say, what the subject does not want to know anything about, but also censorship of the feminine that in the case of a woman who is a mother causes her, as the previous citation suggests, to become "caught up in an "address'" to the child, but also to a partner—for instance, the child's father. She has no access to the feminine in her, which remains out-of-language and unknowable, manifesting only through disturbing symptoms and involuntary acts. When this censorship is at last lifted, the possibility of exploring the boundless creativity of the feminine beyond the relationship to the Other in the social link is opened. This implies the discovery of "the unfoundedness of the symbolic," in Willy Apollon's term.[39] If this dimension of experience exceeds symbolic limits and even exposes its lack of foundation, the acts that express it have consequences, and once the subject comes to know how her own *jouissance* is implicated, it is possible to take responsibility for these acts rather than imputing them to the Other.

In his seminar on anxiety, Lacan devotes some attention to two paintings of female saints by the seventeenth-century Spanish painter Francisco de Zurbarán. One of them is Saint Agatha, depicted holding a tray on which her two breasts rest like mounds, her head tilted toward them, while she calmly looks at the spectator. The other, Saint Lucy, holds her two eyes on a tray. The images emphasize a specific part of the body detached from the rest, but also the fact that the martyrs to whom these objects corresponded are themselves holding the part up and offering it to the viewer. In other words, unlike Baldung's maiden, they do not appear as victims. According to the hagiography, Agatha was an early Christian Sicilian maiden who made a vow of virginity at age fifteen. Since

38 Cantin, "Fantasy."

39 Willy Apollon, "Psychoanalysis and Literature, Pass and Impasse," trans. Tracy McNulty, *Penumbr(a)* 3 (2024): 58, https://www.penumbrajournal.org/no-no-3-/-after-anti-oedipus.

she refused the advances of the Roman prefect Quintanius, she was tortured, her breasts were removed by tongs, and after none of this worked to make her break her vow, she died in prison. Zurbarán's Saint Agatha and Baldung's maiden then present us with two different responses to anxiety and to the originary fantasy. Whereas the maiden fears Death and sees him as the voracious Other trying to take something precious from her—her youth and life—Saint Agatha has gone through death and dismantled the Other of the originary fantasy, to the point that she alone can uphold the object.

In her short essay on the Lacanian breast, Leguil suggests that the breast in Lacan's 1963 seminar is the "part that must be given up to pay the price of one's desire," so it is no longer only an object of the drive, but also an object cause of desire.[40] What matters here, she suggests, is not that she lost the object but rather that the Other tore it off from her and that she can assume her own subjective desire: "What makes her a saint is that she has traversed anxiety and can present these organs of her body as definitively separated from her. She can offer the Other the object *a*, her object *a*, which is also the object cause of desire."[41] It is possible, then, to not turn away from anxiety but instead traverse it to the point of acting from the position of the object-cause of desire. Leguil underscores Lacan's comparison of the analyst to the saint in terms of this position regarding the object. Agatha indicates a different possibility with the breast, a possibility beyond the alternatives of the politics of breastfeeding and vampirism. When a subject can take responsibility for the free drive in her body and for her acts and their consequences for others, the future—rather than repetitions mandated by the logic of fantasy—is opened.

". . . and the Jetty"—A Time Beyond Neurosis

As previously mentioned, Copjec introduces Chris Marker's *La Jetée* into her analysis as part of her observations on the necessary distance between the subject and object *a* to secure symbolic existence, which Lacan represents with the lozenge (◊) between the barred-S and the lowercase-*a* in the formula of the fantasy of the obsessional neurotic: $\$ \lozenge a$. The hero of *La Jetée* is haunted by a powerful image from his childhood at Orly airport's jetty, which he visited on

40 Leguil, "Le sein lacanien," 40.

41 Leguil, 40.

Sunday afternoons, a few years before the Third World War began. Due to the presence of this specific, powerful image in his mind, he is selected among the prisoners to undergo an experiment in which he receives some kind of injection that results in him travelling back in time. The narrative structure of *La Jetée* begins and ends with this location of the jetty, at the precise moment that gave consistency to his image and to which the protagonist physically returns as an adult, thinking he can reach a woman whose face he remembers there along with a violent scene that for a long time troubled him, and that he only later understood to have been the death of a man. In the prologue to the story, or the first jetty scene, the male voice-over narrator also explains that this boy continued to see the images of the unmoving sun, the setting at the end of the jetty, and a woman's face. It is important to notice that upon his return to the jetty, there have been important developments regarding these images. He lived underground after the war that destroyed Paris, in a sunless, dark world without depth of field; over the course of the days of the time-travel experiment, he has also built a very different connection to that woman's face and, importantly, to the time spent by her side. As he runs toward her, he discovers, tragically, that he is the man he remembers seeing in that violent scene, and what he had witnessed without understanding it that first time is his own death. As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Copjec presents this final situation as a collapse of $\$$ and *a* resulting from the dissolution of the lozenge between them. This signifies nothing less than the collapse and dissolution of the fantasy altogether.

The space of the lozenge that, in the formula, represents the relations which prevent this collapse of the logic of fantasy seems to be ruined in *La Jetée*. Ruin is evoked by the narrator's mention that "the surface of Paris, and undoubtedly of the largest part of the world, was uninhabitable, rotten by radioactivity." Copjec in fact suggests, in the chapter preceding the one in question here, that the absence of fantasy space or virtual space in Clérambault's fetishistic photographs of Moroccan bodies wrapped in silk indicates the inoperative status of fantasy there. Instead, the images confront viewers with a perverse gaze that denies lack. Copjec also observes the lack of depth of field in the images of the underground camp in *La Jetée*. Is a perverse gaze in play here, too? At any rate, I would say this indicates precisely that the photo-novel presents us, not only in the hero's fatal moment, but from beginning to end, with a problem for which the neurotic fantasy could never be a solution. Copjec writes:

> In *La Jetée* the hero allows himself to enjoy the woman. But things do not work out very well for those who enjoy, for, as it turns out, when nothing is prohibited, then everything is prohibited. 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." Since every affirmation is founded on a negation, no future is possible in *La Jetée* as long as the hero clings to rather than negates the image of the woman.[42]

After the hero works to first recognize the female face that truly corresponds to his memory, he gradually approaches the woman to begin speaking and strolling around the surface of pre-World War III Paris with her. Children and the sound of birds occupy the space around them in this situation, although a true flow from one frame to the next remains inexistent. In contrast with the outdoor spaces comes a sequence of images in a bedroom, featuring close-ups of the woman's head, naked shoulders, and bare arms, shifting positions while sleeping in a bed as the sound of a flock of chirping birds intensifies, until she awakens as the chirps and calls reach their peak. At this point, famously, she looks directly at the camera and blinks a few times, a striking moment in the film otherwise made up of photographs that either abruptly disappear, replaced by the subsequent one, or, as is the case during the sleeping sequence, slowly fade into the next. This bedroom scene and her smiling eye-contact with the camera can be taken as an indication that the protagonist is who she sees when she awakens. It is not only the formal prohibition on the moving image that has been transgressed at this point, but also the prohibition Copjec points out, against "enjoying the woman" off-limits. Copjec then draws on a claim by Freud in his 1925 "Negation" essay, namely that "the negativism displayed by some psychotics, is probably to be regarded as a sign of a defusion of [drives] that has taken place through a withdrawal of the libidinal components."[43] In sum, because the distance from the forbidden woman was not observed as a grounding negation or "no," nothing is possible; it is the end of the world, and, importantly, there is no future in *La Jetée*.

In the film's plot, after this bedroom scene and a final visit to the Museum of Natural History, the protagonist in fact succeeds in traveling into the future, to

---

42 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 131–32.

43 Freud, "Negation," in *Standard Edition*, 19:239.

speak with other human beings and get help from them to restart the world. This help comes in the form of "a power unit" the hero brings back to the underground camp. He is thereupon released from the experiment, knowing he is no longer useful to the camp directors, who he is convinced will "liquidate him."[44] But he receives a message from people in the future who know how to travel in time more easily, and they open a door for him to join them, which he trades for the opportunity to go back to the jetty (a choice that can be read as an instance of negativism); upon making this choice, he is too late to realize that one of the camp officers has followed him; the policeman shoots the protagonist. While Copjec's reference to the psychotic experience of the "end of the world" comes in to support the argument about forbidden *jouissance*, I suggest it deserves further attention within *La Jetée* itself. For the problem in the story, within a film released in the wake of the Second World War is, precisely, that the world indeed has ended with a Third World War, and the mission the hero is told he is on is one of nothing less than saving humanity and the future. As previously mentioned, the hero is moreover "chosen" by the camp police, and he is convinced that it is because of an image in his mind, even when nothing indicates his having spoken about this to anyone. The voice-over narration explains that the police "spied even on dreams." As for him, the voice-over narrator also states that "he never knows if he directs himself toward her, if he is directed toward her, if he is making things up or if he's dreaming."[45] All these plot details evoke the psychotic experience of the end of the world and of being personally tasked by the Other with a colossal mission, without having a choice. The structure is closer to the work of the delusion than to a fantasy. Yet this is not a case of "*defusion* of drives" and withdrawal of libidinal investment from the world. How does the delusion prompt us to rethink the condition for a desire to live? How does the concern for securing a symbolic existence that the fantasy was supposed to support become displaced by a psychotic mission? Finally, how might the problematic of the forbidden woman also be transformed in a psychotic structure?

To address these questions, I now briefly draw on a psychoanalytic clinic of psychosis, developed in Québec over the past forty-three years by Cantin, Apollon, and Danielle Bergeron. The psychotic delusion responds to what Apollon calls the defect in language; the delusion attempts to repair the structure of the social

44 *La Jetée*, dir. Chris Marker.

45 *La Jetée*, dir. Chris Marker.

link, whose failure to "say it all" the psychotic confronts directly,[46] that is to say, without the mediation of an ego that deploys the cover of repression.[47] Rather than thinking about psychosis as a flawed position where the Name-of-the-Father was not properly installed, the analysts of the GIFRIC (Groupe Interdisciplinaire Freudien de Rechereches et Interventions Cliniques et Culturelles) emphasize a lived-experience that is out-of-language, a "quest for something else" than what already exists, as essential to what constitutes every human being,[48] while remaining *unaddressable* and felt as unwelcome by the Other of culture, that Other in collective consciousness.[49] In the psychotic structure, the symbolic shield against the defect in language is insufficient, and giving up on this intimate quest out-of-language to comply with and be recognized by the Other of culture, that Other who establishes limits to what is sayable, is simply not worthwhile. In fact, when the construction of the sexual—what Apollon calls the cultural montage of the sexual—that censors the feminine and sense within a civilizational framework are imposed to replace desire, the psychotic subject experiences this as violence. Instead, the psychotic subject works to counter the defect in language through a delusion. This delusion is a response to the logic of a mission that carries an unspoken concern for the human in specific modes. In analysis, "the out-of-language that haunted the work of the [psychotic subject's] delusion can pass to the act of a speech [. . .] welcomed within the space of transference" opened by the analyst.[50] Speech about until-then unaddressable "foundational subjective experiences" distils the concern for the human at the core of the delusion and gives modes of expression to the quest and, Cantin writes, "*defuses* the conflict" between "the part of the being where a subjective quest originates and its unreceivable status in the social link" and "frees the energy of the drive that was invested in realizing the enterprise that justified the theory of the delusion."[51] In other words, the unbound or free drive itself is far from "defused." Spurred by a concern for the human, this free drive's trajectory goes beyond the articulation of the individual to society.

46 Willy Apollon, "Le transfert du psychotique," in *Le traitement psychanalytique des psychoses: Sa clinique et ses résultats* (Québec: GIFRIC, 2024), 178–80.

47 Lucie Cantin, "Moments-clés dans la cure analytique du psychotique," in *Le traitement psychanalytique des psychoses*, 192.

48 Cantin, 191.

49 Apollon, "Le transfert du psychotique," 166.

50 Apollon, 182.

51 Cantin, "Moments-clés," 204.

Copjec observes that *La Jetée* "names the primary location of the narrative—the jetty at Orly airport—as well as the danger that threatens completely to overwhelm not only the diegetic characters but the diegesis itself: a 'little piece of reality,' a childhood memory that has not been rejected, thrown out by the hero."[52] In this configuration, the jetty appears as rather vampiric. Yet I think "the jetty" is different from the vampiric double whose function was developed from the perspective of the neurotic structure. What is not thrown out by the hero whose mission in the diegesis is to reinitiate the world after the apocalypse is an image, a memory of a foundational, subjective experience, to recall Cantin's term, whose site is the jetty that gives the film its title. We can thus read the jetty differently: She (*jetée* is a feminine noun in French and therefore comes preceded by the article *la*) does not remain stuck in place, unable to take off, but rather is already breaking out of spatiotemporal limits, out of domains and territories, out of a preexisting order of things. Reminiscent of the ballet leap, called a *grand jeté*, a jetty is an architectural structure that receives its name from the fact that it juts out beyond the shore, throwing itself out into the sea. Later, with the invention of airplanes, a jetty could throw itself out onto the runway tarmac, toward the sky. The transgression inherent to the jetty's architecture is precisely what is at stake in the time-travel situation to which the hero is submitted and which he ends up choosing.

But this is only one loop of the distinctly *spiral* form that insists in *La Jetée*, evoking Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca*—which Copjec mentions as another example of the "body too much"—but also *Vertigo*.[53] All three films explore the problem of the woman and her doubles imprisoned in different temporalities and imposing a dangerous, vertiginous processes of remembrance, reenactment, and working through. *La Jetée*'s reference to *Vertigo* is well known. It takes place in the scene in the park where the couple observe the concentric circles of time visible on the sliced sequoia trunk in front of them, which further evokes the visit to Muir Woods by the couple, where the detective is enthralled by this woman's mysterious suspension in a past moment (she seems to become "possessed" by her great-grandmother who committed suicide after her lover and the father of her child cast her out), which puts him in a position of saving her. One could

52 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 130.

53 *Rebecca*, dir. Alfred Hitchcock (Selznick International Pictures, 1940); *Vertigo*, dir. Alfred Hitchcock (Alfred J. Hitchcock Productions, 1958).

say that *Vertigo* and *La Jetée* both present the woman as an object for the man, the hero in search of truth, even if she is raised to the dignity of the Thing. The symptomatically nameless heroine of *Rebecca* is instead in the position of a subject, struggling, in Copjec's words, "to enter the symbolic framework of the household" because her place is occupied by the "dead-without-knowing-it Rebecca."[54] This place is that of the mistress of the Manderley mansion and of the wife, Mrs. de Winter. The heroine's freedom, according to Copjec, consists in "the exteriorization of her battle with the excess body." When it "becomes objectivized as a narrative conflict rather than the psychical conflict it had been up until this point, the second Mrs. de Winter begins to escape the hold of the first."[55] What is possible for the women in these three films from a perspective centered around the symbolic is a position of lovable, named, and "saved" object in a relationship to a man, who is also bound to the position of "savior," believing he can give the woman what she wants and surpasses what she can expect. In other words, these narratives make it seem as if the man as lover and hero were the solution to what I earlier indicated as the censored thing in the woman's body (to which the child is exposed in its mother). All of this remains caught up in the cultural montage of the sexual.

The orientation of the psychotic structure as reframed by the GIFRIC offers a different vantage point on the woman. In an exposition of the experience of puberty as the time when culture imposes the censorship of the feminine, Apollon writes:

> For young psychotics, whether boy or girl, this montage of sexuality immediately appears as a violence against women, the means of ending which must be found. From second childhood already, young psychotics are affected by *the injustice of having to renounce what can be built as a universe to live in*, in order to submit to

54 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 130.

55 Copjec, 130. In *Vertigo* there is also a problem of doubles and "false claimants." The woman, who appears to commit suicide, reemerges for the depressed detective when he meets a woman who resembles the one he could not save. The reenactment of the suicide leads to the discovery that he had been deceived and to tragedy. There is a parallel structure to the *dénouement* of *La Jetée* in that the hero also returns to the site of a trauma with tragic consequences, although he is not in the position of a savior.

> the need to satisfy the Other in the address and thus to have a place in the bond of companionship.[56]

We can turn back to *La Jetée* to think of the man's experience and decision to return to the jetty at the end of the film. I pointed out that during the camp's time-travel experiments that allow the hero to spend time with the woman, strolling along gardens and public squares, he is not sure what brings him back to her, whether it is his own direction or someone else's. Yet, the moments by her side, although they are fragile and easily interrupted, begin to transform something beyond the lab and camp directors' reach: the two companions' experiences of time. The striking effect of their encounters, from the moment they speak to each other, is that "they are without memories, without projects. Their time builds itself simply around them, with only the taste of the moment they live (*le goût du moment*) and the signs on the walls as points of reference."[57] This particular combination of reference points, the taste of the lived moment and the signs on the walls as marks of other lived moments, that had their own flavor, suggests that the hero is accessing with her what I would call *aesthetic time* to say that it is essential to what Apollon's account of the psychotic subject's experience of second childhood pinpoints, namely, "what can be built as a universe to live in" and which we are asked to renounce in favor of the satisfaction of "the Other in the address," that is to say, in what is sayable and observable within cultural and civilizational limits. It is significant that by going back to "the world of his childhood," the man can discover the taste of the moment and a time that builds itself simply around them as they stroll aimlessly outdoors. There is *un*forbidden *jouissance*, yes, and there is something undeniably uncanny about living a moment twice, and somewhere in a corner of his mind remembering that he is returning from the end of the world. This experience continues but is also continually improved. In the Paris Museum of Natural History gallery of evolution, where they have their last stroll together to look at the display "full of eternal beasts," "the aim is perfectly adjusted. Pro*jected* (pro*jeté*) onto the chosen moment, he can remain there and move effortlessly."[58] In this beautiful moment he does not need to save the woman or the world. The jetty, as I read it, reminds us that subverting the social link, exhausting the chain of signifiers,

---

56 Willy Apollon, "The Human in Question," in *A Psychoanalysis for a Reemergent Humanity*; emphasis added.

57 *La Jetée*, dir. Chris Marker.

58 *La Jetée*, dir. Chris Marker.

and transgressing the limits of both the fantasy and the delusion all expose us to anxiety, which can open not only onto a horrific, senseless void, but also to an aesthetic act of creating time.

That he ends up killed by the camp police as he traverses the jetty to reach the woman does not undermine this time; in fact, it emphasizes that the man has acknowledged his capacity not only to represent an image to himself but also to choose his destination, which can go against the good of the collective and of his own survival. He asks the humans of the future to give him "the world of his childhood and this woman who was maybe waiting for him." This is no mere regressive escape into the past, but instead (like the experience of analysis, I would say), a return along a spiral line, each time slightly different, and perhaps, if the Thing that caused the image to become inscribed in him is released from a frightening representation, an opening onto a future different than that of a Third World War and its destruction of Paris and the world. In the key of psychosis, which refuses the montage of sexuality for its violence against women, the woman in the world of the man's childhood could be the bearer of her own quest, and she would be waiting for him not so they can be the man and the woman expected by culture, but instead so they can continue building aesthetic time as a universe to live in, unfolding in a direction that changes the destructive course of history that leads to the Third World War. As he starts to race toward the woman at the end of the jetty it becomes possible to read the red words printed on the t-shirt he wears under another layer of clothing: *El Santo*, "The Saint." The saint in question is a famous Mexican *lucha libre* silver-masked hero from the 1960s. The man indeed seems prepared, like Saint Agatha, to traverse anxiety, as he continues toward his goal, aware "with a bit of vertigo that the child he had been must be present too, watching the planes."[59] As Copjec notes, here (as in *Rebecca*) there is a problem of a body too much. I would say *La Jetée*'s hero, bearing the name of *El Santo* on his breast, wishes to step forward like Saint Agatha, although here he is in the moment of going through the traversal, whereas Zurbarán's Saint Agatha has already undergone the breast excision and death, giving her access to this impossible moment of gently offering the object in a tray.

[59] *La Jetée*, dir. Chris Marker.

As the man collapses, shot by the camp police agent, his left arm lifts in a highly stylized line, like a balletic, dying swan. He is understanding that what he had witnessed as a child was the scene of his own death. A fragment from the childhood memory the narrator highlights at the beginning of the film is *ce corps qui bascule*, "this body that is knocked off-balance." The arm gesture repeats the forms of birds' wings and beaks seen in the gallery of evolution, and recalls the birds heard in the crucial bedroom awakening scene. The collapsing body can be seen, then, as an instance of object *a*, in a fall that paradoxically asserts a certain kind of freedom from the Other who takes his life. If this fatal destiny does not reopen a livable future—one should recall that his journey into the future did allow him to bring back the power unit to restart life after the end of the world—then at the very least he does succeed in reopening a key scene at which his body had been eroticized by the work of the free drive and given him not only an indelible image, but also an experience of aesthetic time to live and die for.

Data availability statement

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

References

Apollon, Willy. "The Human in Question." In *A Psychoanalysis for a Reemergent Humanity: The Metapsychology of Willy Apollon*, edited by Lucie Cantin, Jeffrey S. Librett, and Tracy McNulty. Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming.

———. "Le transfert du psychotique." In *Le traitment psychanalytique des psychoses: Sa clinique et ses résultants*, edited by GIFRIC, 163–185.

———. "Psychoanalysis and Literature, Pass and Impasse." *Penumbr(a)* 3 (2024): 54–81. https://www.penumbrajournal.org/no-no-3-/-after-anti-oedipus.

Cantin, Lucie. "The Fantasy: Its Function and Modalities, Traversal and Clinic." In *A Psychoanalysis for a Reemergent Humanity: The Metapsychology of Willy Apollon*, edited by Lucie Cantin, Jeffrey S. Librett, and Tracy McNulty. Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming.

———. "Moments-clés dans la cure analytique du psychotique." In *Le traitment psychanalytique des psychoses: Sa clinique et ses résultants*, edited by GIFRIC, 189–214.

Cantin, Lucie, Jeffrey S. Librett, and Tracy McNulty, eds. *A Psychoanalysis for a Reemergent Humanity: The Metapsychology of Willy Apollon*. Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming.

Copjec, Joan. *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. New York: Verso, 2015.

Freud, Sigmund. “The Interpretation of Dreams (1900).” In *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)*, edited by James Strachey, ix–338. Vol. 5 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press, 1953.

———. “Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety (1926 [1925]).” In *An Autobiographical Study, Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety, The Question of Lay Analysis, and Other Works, 1925–1926*, edited by James Strachey, 77–175. Vol. 20 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press, 1959.

———. “Negation (1925).” In *The Ego and the Id and Other Works, 1923–1925*, edited by James Strachey, 233–39. Vol. 19 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press, 1961.

GIFRIC, ed. *Le traitement psychoanalytique des psychoses. Sa clinique et ses résultats*. Québec: GIFRIC, 2024.

Hichcock, Alfred, dir. *Rebecca*. Written by Robert E. Sherwood and Joan Harrison. Selznick International Pictures, 1940.

———. *Vertigo*. Alfred J. Hitchcock Productions, 1958.

Lacan, Jacques. *L’angoisse*. Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 10. Paris: Seuil, 2004.

———. *The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*. Translated by Sylvana Tomaselli. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 2. New York: W. W. Norton, 1991.

———. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Denis Porter. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 7. New York: W. W. Norton, 1992.

Leguil, Clotilde. “Le sein lacanien.” *La cause du désir* 94, no. 3 (2016): 36–41. https://doi.org/10.3917/lcdd.094.0036.

McNulty, Tracy. “Untreatable: The Freudian Act and its Legacy.” *Crisis and Critique* 6, no. 1 (2019): https://www.crisiscritique.org/storage/app/media/2019-04-02/tracy.pdf.

Marker, Chris, dir. *La Jetée*. Argos Films, 1962. Film.

Filozofski vestnik
ISSN 0353-4510 | Volume 46 | Number 2 | 2025 | 93–113
 | DOI: 10.3986/FV.46.2.04

Roland Végső*

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

* University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA
roland.vegso@uga.edu | https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2758-2824

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.

∞

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]

* * *

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]

❊ ❊ ❊

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

---

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.

⁂

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

---

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.

⁂

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.

References

Arendt, Hannah. *Denktagebuch, 1950–1973*. Edited by Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann. Munich: Piper Verlag, 2002.

Buck-Morss, Susan. *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000.

Chaplin, Charlie, dir. *The Great Dictator*. 1940; Los Angeles, CA: United Artists.

Colebrook, Claire. *Who Would You Kill To Save the World?* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023.

Copjec, Joan. *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation*. Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2004.

———. *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994.

Davis, Oliver, and Tim Dean. *Hatred of Sex*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume II*. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Freud, Sigmund. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920)." In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology, and Other Works, 1920–1922*, edited by James Strachey, 2–64. Vol. 18 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press, 1955.

———. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton, 2005.

———. *The Future of an Illusion*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton, 1989.

———. *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton, 1989.

Friedman, Thomas L. *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2005.

Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press, 1992.

Gaston, Sean. *The Concept of the World from Kant to Derrida*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987.

———. "To Eternal Peace." In *Basic Wreitings of Kant*, edited by Allen W. Wood, 433–76.

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

Marker, Chris, dir. *La Jetée*. Paris: Argos Films, 1962.

Végső, Roland. *Worldlessness After Heidegger: Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, Deconstruction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020.

Filozofski vestnik
ISSN 0353-4510 | Volume 46 | Number 2 | 2025 | 115–40
 | DOI: 10.3986/FV.46.2.05

Russell Sbriglia*

Minus One, or the Mismeasure of Man: Sartorial Superegoism and the Ethics of Unruliness

Keywords
Joan Copjec, Jacques Lacan, ethics of psychoanalysis, superego, perversion, fantasy, racism

Abstract
This essay looks at chapter 4 of Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire*, "The Sartorial Superego," in order to advance its critique of racism as a form of perversion that posits the racial other as a superegoic Other thought to harbor an obscene enjoyment or "will to *jouissance*." While other chapters of *Read My Desire* have played a pivotal role in shaping Lacanian theory over the past thirty years—especially Lacanian film theory ("Locked Room/Lonely Room") and Lacanian sex theory ("Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason")—"The Sartorial Superego" has yet to receive the attention it deserves for the contribution it makes not only to Lacanian race theory, but also to Lacanian ethics more generally. Aiming to redress this oversight, the essay first rehearses, so as to bring into better relief, Copjec's critique of the perverse "sartorial superegoism" at work in a series of photographs of cloth-donned colonial others taken by famed French psychologist G. G. de Clérambault. It then applies Copjec's analysis of Clérambault's sartorial superegoism to more recent, far more sadistic, instances of sartorial superegoic violence perpetrated against postcolonial others in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001. In so doing, the essay demonstrates that properly grasping both the prescience of and the urgency behind *Read My Desire's* concluding call for "another logic of the superego [to] commence" requires reckoning with "The Sartorial Superego."

* Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ, USA
russell.sbriglia@shu.edu | https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7774-1798

Minus ena ali Človeška napačna mera: krojaško nadjazovstvo in etika neposlušnosti

Ključne besede
Joan Copjec, Jacques Lacan, etika psihoanalize, nadjaz, perverzija, fantazma, rasizem

Povzetek
Ta članek obravnava četrto poglavje knjige Joan Copjec *Read My Desire*, »Krojaški nadjaz«, da bi, izhajajoč iz te obravnave, nadalje razvil kritiko rasizma kot oblike perverzije, ki rasnega drugega postavlja kot nadjazovskega Drugega, za katerega se domneva, da skriva obsceni užitek oziroma »voljo do užitka«. Medtem ko so druga poglavja knjige *Read My Desire* v zadnjih tridesetih letih odigrala ključno vlogo pri oblikovanju Lacanove teorije – zlasti lacanovske filmske teorije (»Zaklenjena soba/Osamljena soba«) in lacanovske teorije seksualnosti (»Spol in evtanazija uma«) –, pa poglavje »Krojaški nadjaz« še ni bilo deležno pozornosti, ki si jo zasluži za prispevek ne le k Lacanovi teoriji rase, ampak tudi k Lacanovi etiki na splošno. Da bi to pomanjkljivost odpravil, članek najprej ponovi Copjecino kritiko perverznega »krojaškega nadjaza«, ki se kaže v seriji fotografij kolonialnih drugih v oblačilih, ki jih je posnel znani francoski psiholog G. G. de Clérambault. Nato Copjecino analizo Clérambaultovega krojaškega nadjaza uporabi na novejših, veliko bolj sadističnih primerih krojaškega, nadjazovskega nasilja nad postkolonialnimi drugimi po napadih na Svetovni trgovinski center in Pentagon 11. septembra 2001. S tem esej dokazuje, da je za pravilno razumevanje predvidevanja in nujnosti sklepnega poziva knjige *Read My Desire* k »neki drugi logiki nadjaza« treba upoštevati »krojaški nadjaz«.

∞

We are told that man is the measure of all things. But where is his own measure? Is it to be found in himself?
— Jacques Lacan[1]

Halfway through the fourth chapter of *Read My Desire*, "The Sartorial Superego," Joan Copjec succinctly mathematizes the difference between psychoanalytic and

[1] Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), 68.

utilitarian ethics. As she explains, whereas utilitarianism blithely assumes that "man can be counted as zero," psychoanalysis insists that, if counted man can indeed be, it is only as "minus one."[2] Confident that "the goal of man" is the maximization of pleasure and that pleasure can therefore be used to "regulate and manipulate man," utilitarianism presumes that "man is basically and infinitely manageable," that he is, in short, "fundamentally *ruly*."[3] The psychoanalytic objection to this supposition, Copjec clarifies, rests not on the protest that "man is *more* than [. . .] rationalist engineers" like Jeremy Bentham in philosophy or Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand in architecture will allow, but rather that "man is, in a manner, *less* than" utilitarians realize insofar as "he is radically separated from, and cannot know, what he wants"—a separation and an unknowing that renders man fundamentally *unruly*.[4] Hence Copjec's conclusion that "the difference between the utilitarian and the psychoanalytic subject is the difference between zero and minus one, between a subject who is driven to seek the maximization of his pleasure in his own greater good, and a subject for whom pleasure cannot function as an index of the good, since the latter is lost to him"—lost because the subject is ultimately "subject to a principle *beyond* pleasure."[5] This principle is, of course, what psychoanalysis designates as the death drive.

As Copjec stresses, it is on this principle of the death drive, the principle that the subject is essentially, constitutively, "*not driven to seek his own good*," that psychoanalysis grounds its Copernican revolution in ethics.[6] To subscribe to an unruly ethics of the drive is to maintain that the subject's freedom, paradoxically, is possible only by way of submission. So far as psychoanalysis is concerned, "the freedom of the ethical subject" is "the freedom to resist the lure of the pleasure principle and to submit oneself to the law of the death drive."[7] This is why, *contra* utilitarianism, psychoanalysis insists that freedom resides not in a subject "'choosing' its own good" and "act[ing] in its own best interest" (an "illusory freedom," Copjec stresses, since the good determines the choice and not vice versa), but rather in a subject "choosing *not* to be motivated by self-interest

2 Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 87.
3 Copjec, 85.
4 Copjec, 87.
5 Copjec, 87.
6 Copjec, 87.
7 Copjec, 96.

and thus [. . .] acting contrary to its own good—even to the point of bringing about its own death."[8] Mismeasuring man as zero rather than minus one, utilitarianism fails to fathom that "the subject's only freedom" consists "precisely in its ability to *disregard* all circumstances, causes, conditions, all promises of reward or punishment for its actions."[9] In short, as Kant would put it, the subject's freedom is non-pathological.

This invocation of Kant is no accident, of course, for, as Copjec notes, Freud was not the first to frame freedom in such subtractive terms. Kant primed the psychoanalytic pump by placing the categorical imperative "in a realm radically beyond the phenomenal," thereby "splitting the subject between two realms, one subject to the determinations of historical conditions [the phenomenal], the other [the noumenal] not."[10] Yet, as Copjec likewise stresses, by failing to account for the "enunciating instance" of the categorical imperative—a failure that makes it seem as though it "come[s] from nowhere," which, in turn, allows its addressee to "presume to occupy the vacant enunciative position" and (mis)take itself as "the source of the statement"—Kant "partially sealed up again the gap he so dramatically opened."[11] As Lacan would put it, what Kant failed to do was to distinguish between the subject of the *enunciated* (the subject of the *statement* that Kant correctly understood the categorical imperative to be) and the subject of the *enunciation*, the latter of which psychoanalysis identifies as the superego.[12]

This distinction between the subject of the enunciated and the subject of the enunciation is the turn of the screw that transposes us from the realm of Kantian ethics to that of Lacanian ethics. For if, as Copjec puts it, "the sole moral maxim of psychoanalysis" is to "not surrender your internal conflict, your division"—a gloss of Lacan's famous maxim from *Seminar VII* to not "give ground relative to" your desire—then acting ethically, paradoxically, entails not *identifying* with the moral law, as in Kant, but rather *disidentifying* with and "*recoil*[*ing*]" in "moral

8 Copjec, 96.
9 Copjec, 96.
10 Copjec, 96.
11 Copjec, 96–98.
12 As Copjec stresses, this failure to distinguish between the subject of the enunciated and the subject of the enunciation is why for Kant "the ethical subject hears the voice of conscience as its own." *Read My Desire*, 98.

revulsion" from this "incomprehensible part of our being."[13] Psychoanalysis "insist[s] on exposing" the "sadistic superego" as the "cruel enunciator" of the moral law, Copjec concludes, because it "wishes to demonstrate the ethical necessity of hearing the otherness of this voice and of maintaining our distance from it. It is always and only this division of the subject that psychoanalysis insists on."[14] Contrary, then, to the typical (mis)understanding of the superego as an ethical agency, Lacan insists that to (attempt to) comply with the injunctions of the superego is patently *unethical* insofar as to do so is to betray—to *compromise*—the "pure," non-pathological desire upon which the death-driven ethics of psychoanalysis is founded.[15]

Generally speaking, "The Sartorial Superego" is not the most feted chapter of *Read My Desire*. That distinction belongs to its final chapter, "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason," wherein Copjec anticipates by more than two decades much of the recent work in Lacanian theory regarding the ontological dimension of sex by insisting, *contra* Judith Butler, that sexual difference is not a discursive difference "inscribed in the symbolic" like "racial, class, or ethnic differences," but is instead "a real [. . .] difference."[16] And yet, as we will see, understanding what is at stake in "The Sartorial Superego" is crucial for understanding why Copjec concludes the book by so stridently distinguishing between the "real

---

13 Copjec, 88, 92. Lacan's maxim reads as follows: "I propose then that, from an analytical point of view, the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire." Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 319.

14 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 98.

15 Slavoj Žižek has forcefully made this precise point on numerous occasions. As he puts it in *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, for instance: "Lacan's maxim of the ethics of psychoanalysis is *not* to be confounded with the pressure of the superego [. . .]. [I]n a first approach it may seem that the maxim 'Do not give up your desire!' coincides with the superego command 'Enjoy!'—do we not compromise our desire precisely by renouncing enjoyment? Is it not a fundamental thesis of Freud, a kind of Freudian commonplace, that the superego forms the basic, 'primitive' kernel of the ethical agency? Lacan goes against these commonplaces: between the ethics of desire and the superego, he posits a relationship of radical exclusion." Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (New York: Verso, 1994), 67.

16 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 207. See, for instance, Alenka Zupančič, *What* Is *Sex?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017); Slavoj Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019); and Lee Edelman, *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).

difference" that is sexual difference and symbolic differences such as those of race and ethnicity—a distinction that looms large over the book's famous final sentence: "Another logic of the superego must commence."[17] For, as she insists, it is only by attending to the real of sexual difference that we are able to grasp the subject's constitutive unruliness, what she dubs its "sovereign incalculability"; and insofar as this incalculability is the very hinge upon which the ethics of psychoanalysis pivots, it must, she also insists, be acknowledged if we are to resist the ever-increasing superegoic "demands for the surrender of difference to processes of 'homogenization,' 'purification,' or any of the other crimes against otherness with which the rise of racism has begun to acquaint us."[18] *Read My Desire* thus doesn't merely anticipate the sex-driven "ontological turn" in contemporary Lacanian theory. By dint of its theorization of the "sartorial superego," it likewise anticipates much of the current work by Lacanian theorists to trace, so as to traverse, what Todd McGowan has recently termed the "racist fantasy."[19] Before delving into the relation between the sartorial superego and the racist fantasy, however, we must first consider Copjec's analysis of racism as a symptom of the failure of that more primary fantasy upon which the liberal modern order rests: the utilitarian fantasy.

Perversion and the Utilitarian Fantasy

Copjec sets the stage for her notion of the sartorial superego by way of an extended analysis of the numerous perverse photographs of colonial cloth taken by a man whom Lacan once lauded as his "only master": psychiatrist G. G. de Clérambault.[20] Following Copjec, my use of the term "perverse" to characterize Clérambault's photographs draws on the Lacanian understanding of perversion

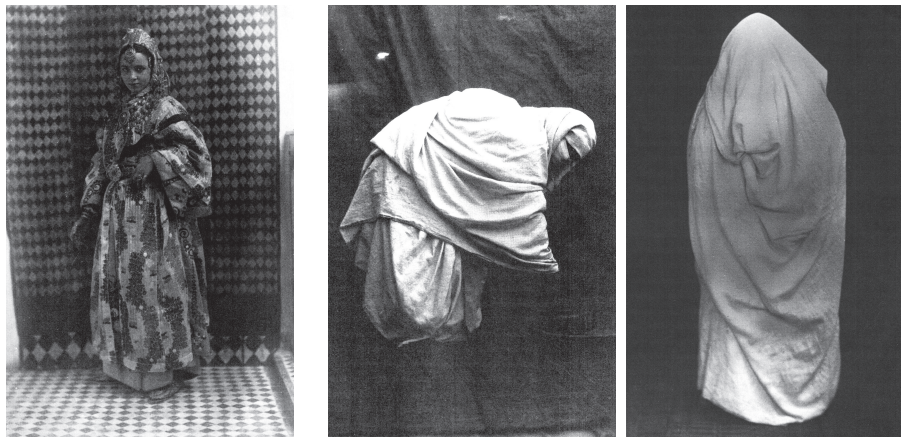
17 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 236.

18 Copjec, 208.

19 See Todd McGowan, *The Racist Fantasy: The Unconscious Roots of Hatred* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2022). For other recent Lacanian work on racial identity and the psychopathology of racism, see Sheldon George, *Trauma and Race: A Lacanian Study of African American Racial Identity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016); Gautam Basu Thakur, *Postcolonial Lack: Identity, Culture, Surplus* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020); Jack Black, *The Psychosis of Race: A Lacanian Approach to Racism and Racialization* (New York: Routledge, 2024); and many of the essays collected in Sheldon George and Derek Hook, eds., *Lacan and Race: Racism, Identity, and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

20 Quoted in Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 65.

as the turning of oneself into an instrument of the Other's enjoyment. As she demonstrates over the course of the chapter, a number of these photographs, particularly "those in which the bodily form has completely disappeared," are not ruled by the logic of *fantasy*, which would entail Clérambault positioning himself as a "colonialist subject confronted with an objectified image of his own loss," but by the logic of *perversion*, with Clérambault positioning himself as "the gaze of the Moroccan Other," as himself occupying the position of the *objet petit a*.[21] In an "inversion" of the fantasy, these perverse photographs turn the cloth donned by the colonial other into a fetish object that enables Clérambault to disavow his own lack by transposing his own split, his own "barring," onto the Other.[22] The proper Lacanian formula to apply to *these* photographs is thus not "$\$ \lozenge a$," the formula for fantasy, but its inversion, "$a \lozenge \$$," the formula for perversion (see Figure).



$\$ \lozenge a$ $a \lozenge \$$

Fig.: Photographs by G. G. de Clérambault

By positioning himself not "in relation to the imaginary form of the object *a*," as in fantasy, but as himself the object *a* "in its real form," Clérambault "places

[21] Copjec, 78, 111.

[22] See Copjec, 109. It is Lacan who, in *Seminar XI*, defines perversion as "inverted fantasy," or, more precisely, as "an inverted effect of the phantasy." He also explains in the very next sentence that in perversion, "It is the subject who determines himself as object, in his encounter with the division of subjectivity." Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 185.

himself in the real, the only place where nothing is lacking, where knowledge is certain."[23] In contrast to the hysterical subject, for whom the Other's desire remains utterly opaque—hence the hystericizing question, "*Che Vuoi?*," which is a thoroughly *ethical* question insofar as it bespeaks a distance between enunciation and enunciated—Clérambault, as a perverted subject, "places himself in the position of 'never being deprived with regard to knowledge'" of what the Other wants.[24] No sublime hysteric, the pervert poses no such *Che vuoi?* because he finds nothing inscrutable or perplexing in the demand of the Other. On the contrary, the pervert *knows very well* what the Other wants or enjoys. Indeed, as Néster Braunstein stresses, it is this very "*savoirjouir*," this "*jouissance* know-how [. . .] in the Other," that paves the way to the perverse act, for it is the pervert's very styling of himself a "subject supposed to *savoirjouir*" that makes him all too willing to serve as the instrument—or, as Lacan alternately puts it in *Seminar XI*, the "organ"—of the Other's sickening surplus-enjoyment.[25]

It is precisely this self-instrumentalization (or self-*organ*ization) that Copjec sees at work in those Clérambault photographs in which the bodily form of the cloth-donning colonial other has all but disappeared. Photographing the cloth "to meet the satisfaction of [the Other's] gaze"—that is, to satisfy the sadistic sartorial superego—Clérambault perversely "makes no claims on any right to enjoyment" in these photos;[26] instead, he "busies himself" with the fetish object "only for the sake of the Other."[27] In so doing, he "evades [the] division," the "internal conflict," constitutive of his subjectivity by "making himself the *agent*"—again, the instrument or organ—of "a division outside himself."[28] In short, he compromises his desire. Yet this is only half the problem, for in compromising *his* desire, Clérambault cannot help but *fail to read the other's desire*, and the

23 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 109.

24 Copjec, 109.

25 Néster A. Braunstein, *Jouissance: A Lacanian Concept*, trans. Silvia Rosman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020), 67, 201, 67, 203. I find "organ" preferable to "instrument" insofar as it better captures the undead enjoyment, the "immortal," "irrepressible," "indestructible life," as Lacan puts it, with which the phallic object pulsates. As I address later, Lacan gives this "organ of the drive," or "organ of the libido," two names: "*hommelette*" and "lamella" (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 198, 196, 200).

26 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 111.

27 Copjec, 115.

28 Copjec, 111.

result of this failure—to trope the title of Copjec's follow-up to *Read My Desire*, *Imagine There's No Woman*—is that he imagines there *is* an Other.[29]

To return, then, to the distinction Copjec draws between utilitarian and psychoanalytic ethics, what these photographs ultimately reveal is not Clérambault's personal ethical failure but, rather, the ethical failure of what she terms the "utilitarian fantasy."[30] As she elaborates, utilitarianism's fantasy of the maximization of pleasure—the very fantasy that enables it to count man as zero and, thus, an infinitely *manageable*, fundamentally *ruly* being—is

> sustained by the structural suspicion that somewhere—in the other—the principle [of the maximization of pleasure] has defaulted. Included, and necessarily so, in the fantasy of a perfect reciprocity of social relations is the negation of the principle that produces the fantasy. For someone—the other—must structurally be supposed to oppose this principle, by the very assertion of its own will. The system of utilitarianism only constitutes itself as such, only thinks its totality by including within itself an element that gives positive form to the impossibility it otherwise excludes. This element is the positive will of the other; it is, in psychoanalytic terms, utilitarianism's symptom.[31]

This "positive will of the other" that functions as "utilitarianism's symptom," as the disavowed "exception" that at one and the same time founds the utilitarian fantasy and functions as its "internal negation," is what Lacan, in his paradigmatic *écrit* on the subject of psychoanalytic ethics, "Kant *avec* Sade," famously dubbed the "will to *jouissance*."[32] As the voice of the superego, the will to *jouissance* sadistically bombards the subject with the imperative, "Enjoy!"[33] It is in

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

[30] Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 115.

[31] Copjec, 104–6.

[32] Jacques Lacan, "Kant with Sade," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 652. The definition of the symptom as "the point of exception" that simultaneously structures an ideology (or, in this instance, a fantasy) and serves as its "internal negation" is Žižek's. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 23.

[33] Hence Lacan's claim that the Kantian categorical imperative is equivalent to the Sadean will to *jouissance*: "[I]t is clearly Kant's will that is encountered in the place of this will that can only be said to be a will to jouissance if we explain that it is the subject reconstituted through alienation at the cost of being nothing but the instrument of jouissance." Lacan,

this sense that those photographs wherein Clérambault perversely fetishizes the "useless, overbearing presence" of colonial cloth can be said to function as instantiations of the sartorial superego, for they "give positive form" to utilitarianism's disavowed dependence on the Other's will to *jouissance*.[34] To again quote Copjec at length, the division of Clérambault's photographs into those that extol the usefulness of colonial cloth and those that fetishize its uselessness

> corresponds to the division between the statement or fantasy of utilitarianism (of the ethical value of useful pleasure) and the useless pleasure of our neighbor, which enables, at the same time as it is neglected by, the fantasy. By not converting the Other's supposed enjoyment into an image useful to utilitarianism, by laying the two alternatives side by side, the photographs taken by Clérambault expose what the fantasy obscures: its strict dependence on the supposition of the Other's obscene enjoyment. Not an enjoyment that can be corralled by use, but one threateningly outside the bounds of utility.[35]

To further illustrate this fissure in the utilitarian fantasy, as well as to anticipate some of the more militant manifestations of the sartorial superego at which we will look later in this essay, let us consider the case of another famous pervert, that of the character Leonard Lawrence, a.k.a. "Private Pyle" (Vincent D'Onofrio), from Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987).[36] Rather than disidentifying with and "recoil[ing] before the violence and obscenity of the superego's incitement to *jouissance*, to a boundless and aggressive enjoyment"—a function performed by the character of the drill sergeant (R. Lee Ermey), who is the cruel, sadistic enunciator of the superego in the film—Leonard *overidentifies with it*.[37] Failing to hear the otherness of this voice, which would necessitate maintaining his distance from it, Leonard, like the Kantian subject when interpellated by the moral law, assumes this voice as his own. This is why, immediately before killing the drill sergeant and turning the rifle on himself, he recites the "Rifleman's

"Kant with Sade," 654. Here we have yet another definition of the perverse subject as "the instrument of jouissance."

34 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 116.

35 Copjec, 115.

36 The following discussion of Leonard and *Full Metal Jacket* both draws from and expands upon Žižek's analysis of the character and film in *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, dir. Sophie Feinnes (Zeitgeist Films, 2013).

37 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 92.

Creed": "This is my rifle. There are many like it, but this one is mine . . ." At various points throughout this creed, the recruit proclaims the rifle (a fetishized phallic object if ever there was one) not merely his "best friend," but his very "life," even going so far as to proclaim, "My rifle is human, even as I, because it is my life. Thus, I will learn it as a brother [. . .]. We will become part of each other."[38] With the exception of these last few lines, which aren't included in the film's truncated version of the creed, Leonard recites all the aforementioned ones (including the line about the rifle being his life) during the scene in which he runs amok and kills the drill sergeant before turning the gun on himself.

It is instructive to juxtapose this creed with the following obscene marching chant that recurs throughout the film: "This is my rifle, this is my gun. This is for fighting, this is for fun." In this chant, the "gun" whose stipulated use is "fun" rather than "fighting" (a utility reserved for the rifle) is the soldier's penis, a point emphasized by the recruits, who grab their crotches as they proclaim that their "gun" is "for fun." When we consider this chant alongside the Rifleman's Creed, we encounter the same splitting of the utilitarian fantasy that Copjec traces throughout Clérambault's photographs. Acknowledging that sex can be, and often is, engaged in for "fun" rather than for procreation, the chant at the same time *disavows* the uselessness of this "fun" by recruiting it into the ranks of utility, ascribing it a use value by making it "for" something. The creed, on the other hand, is the symptom of this disavowal of the Other's useless will to *jouissance*. In contrast to the chant, the creed doesn't extol the rifle's utility. Rather, as we have seen, it all but worships it as the rifleman's very "life," an object that is "human, even as I, because it is my life": hence the creed's assertion that rifle and rifleman "will become part of each other."

To thus return to our earlier discussion of the pervert turning himself into an "organ" of the Other's surplus-enjoyment, Leonard's rifle is a perfect instance of what Žižek, inverting Deleuze and Guattari's "body without organs," would term an "organ without a body," an excessive, phallic appendage that, precisely insofar as it is phallic, functions as an agent of castration.[39] Indeed, that

[38] Here and throughout, I am quoting from the version of the creed available here: https://www.usmcu.edu/Research/Marine-Corps-History-Division/Frequently-Requested-Topics/Marines-Rifle-Creed/.

[39] For Žižek's distinction between the organ without a body and the body without organs, see Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge,

the rifle functions as an organ without a body, an organ of the "immortal," "irrepressible," and "indestructible life" with which the phallic object pulsates, becomes even clearer if we consider the following line from the full version of the creed: "I will ever guard it [the rifle] against the ravages of weather and damage *as I will ever guard my legs, my arms, my eyes and my heart against damage*" (my emphasis).[40] By turning himself into this instrument-organ of the Other's will to *jouissance*, Leonard inverts, as perversion does the fundamental fantasy, the meaning or signification of the term "life" in the "Rifleman's Creed," for the rifle comes to assume the role of his "life" not insofar as it protects him in battle (i.e., preserves his biological life), but insofar as it embodies the undead, immortal life substance of the drive: *jouissance*.

In answer, then, to the drill sergeant's famous question, "Private Pyle, what is your major malfunction?," Leonard's major malfunction is that his anthropomorphization of the rifle as something "human, even as him" results not in the humanization of the rifle but, inversely, the *inhumanization* of the rifleman into an instrument-organ of the undead enjoyment of the drive. To thus invoke one of Lacan's other terms for the organ without a body, what causes Leonard to "crack up" is that he has perversely turned himself into an "*hommelette*," that little piece of the real which is "the libido, *qua* [. . .] immortal life, or irrepressible life [. . .], simplified, indestructible life," and of which "all the forms of the *objet a*"—gaze, voice, breast, phallus, and feces—are "the representatives, the equivalents."[41] It is therefore only fitting that after killing the drill sergeant Leonard blows his own head off with the rifle, for he has become nothing but an organ of the acephalous drive.

I have already underscored the ethical dimension of the *Che vuoi?*, but for Copjec the pivotal question upon which the ethics of psychoanalysis turns is the following: "Would the Other be willing to sacrifice for us?"[42] The answer to this question, as intimated by Freud's "undisguised and unabashed *incomprehension*" when addressing utilitarianism's moral command to "Love thy neighbor as thyself"—or, as Copjec restyles it, to "Love thy superego as thyself"—is an emphatic

2004).

40 See note 25, above.

41 Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 197–98. Lacan's less "joky" (and more frequently cited) term for the organ without a body is "*lamella*" (197).

42 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 91.

"No!"[43] For the Other, by its very definition, brooks no sacrifice. As a "malign, noxious neighbor who will spare us no cruelty in the accrual of its own pleasure," a neighbor whose law is not "humane and equitable," but "capric[ious], arbitrar[y], destructi[ve]"—in short, sadistic—the Other is a neighbor with whom the only relation of exchange is a "nonequivalent" one.[44] This is why, *contra* utilitarian ethics, which holds that "one must act in such a way that everyone would benefit,"[45] the "sadistic law of psychoanalysis,"[46] the aforementioned "will to *jouissance*," holds that it is always the Other, always the sadistic superego, that "benefits from the sacrifice of enjoyment—and always at the subject's expense."[47] As Žižek puts it, "the more we obey the superego, the greater [. . .] the enjoyment accumulated in it and, thus, the greater the pressure it exerts on us"—until, like Leonard, we crack or explode.[48]

Sartorial Superegoism and the Racist Fantasy

We still, however, have not quite explained what, precisely, Copjec means by the "sartorial superego." To do so, I return to my earlier point regarding perversion as both a compromise (a "surrender," in Copjec's words) of the subject's desire and a failure to read the Other's desire—a failure, as we have said, that causes one to imagine that there *is* an Other. As Copjec stresses, this surrendering of desire has been the cause of "some of the most violent aggressions against our neighbors."[49] Indeed, taking the "well-documented" utilitarian fantasy of "an erotic and despotic colonial cloth" as her case in point—a fantasy in which what was "capital," she stresses, was the symptomatic "surplus pleasure," the "useless *jouissance*," that "the voluminous cloth was supposed to veil and the colonial subject, thus hidden, was supposed to enjoy"—Copjec highlights how

43 Copjec, 91, 92.

44 Copjec, 92. In characterizing the subject's relation to the superego as a "nonequivalent" one, I am drawing on Žižek's reading of the "nonequivalent exchange" at work between subject and substance throughout the dialectic of *Bildung* in the "Spirit" chapter of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. See Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 27.

45 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 96.

46 Copjec, 94.

47 Copjec, 96.

48 Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 160.

49 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 98.

this fantasy fueled "the singular and sustained effort of imperialism to remove the veils that covered its colonial neighbor."[50] As she concludes, "every effort to strip away the veil was clearly an aggression against the bloated presence of this enjoyment that would not release itself into the universal pool."[51] Here we have finally arrived at a more concrete sense of what Copjec means by the term "sartorial superego." As she queries: "Isn't this fantasmatic figure of the veiled colonial subject a kind of objectified, sartorial form of the superego? Hasn't the obscene, superegoic neighbor, abandoned by utilitarianism, returned in the form of those who lived in literal proximity to its project, its colonial neighbors?"[52]

To illustrate both the prescience and the persistence of such queries, we could very well add to them the following ones: What are the perverse, sadistic acts of violence triggered by the various cloths worn by post- and neo-colonial others—hijabs, niqabs, burkas, keffiyehs, dastars, etc.—if not instantiations of the sadistic sartorial superego? What are the laws prohibiting the public wearing of hijabs in France or of burkas in Belgium if not similar instantiations of the sartorial superego? Does not the persistence of questions like these illustrate just how prescient Lacan was when, in 1973, he predicted that a "rise in racism" would result from (as Copjec puts it) the "fetishization of private *jouissance*" endemic to our too-late-capitalist order, with its "ever smaller factions of people

50 Copjec, 106. That Clérambault's fetishistic photographs manifest utilitarianism's symptom nicely illustrates Žižek's point that the fetish is "effectively a kind of *envers* of the symptom," its "other side." Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008).

51 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 106.

52 Copjec, 106. Here we must distinguish between empirical "colonial neighbors" and the superegoic "neighbor"—or, as Mauro Resmini puts it, the colonial "other" and the superegoic "Other." As Resmini explains, in a "remarkable twist," the pervert/sadist's victims, "the ones whose desire the sadist knows and exploits for his own enjoyment," are "not the Other," for "a split, in fact, occurs: the victims are reduced to *others*, that is, dispensable instruments in the hands of the sadistic executioners, while the Other as Law is elevated to a transcendental guarantee of the executioner's acts [. . .]. In fully submitting to the Law, an inflexible Other that bears no desire, the sadist becomes its docile instrument. This is the essence of the pervert's position: it disavows the lack in the Other by projecting it onto the other." Mauro Resmini, "Asymmetries of Desire: *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*," in *Unwatchable*, ed. Nicholas Baer et al. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 161–62.

proclaiming their duty-bound devotion to their own special brand of enjoyment"?[53] To quote Lacan's own words on the "rise of racism": "With our *jouissance* going off the track, only the Other is able to mark its position, but only insofar as we are separated from this Other. Whence certain fantasies—unheard of before the melting pot."[54]

In his recent book *The Racist Fantasy*, Todd McGowan provides a more contemporary instance of the sartorial superego: the banning throughout much of France of the "burkini," an article of swimwear, authorities argued, that "violated French laicity, the restriction on public displays of religious clothing and symbols."[55] International headlines were made when, in August of 2016, a group of four police officers confronted a woman wearing a burkini on a beach in Nice. The officers not only issued the woman a ticket for "not wearing an outfit respecting good morals and secularism," but also forced her to partially remove it.[56] Such an incident perfectly encapsulates the shift that western society has undergone from a society of prohibition to one of enjoyment—a shift brought about by the postmodern decline of the paternal function, the "Name-of-the-Father" (*nom-du-père*), or, as Žižek has characterized it, the "demise of symbolic efficiency."[57] As McGowan succinctly puts it, "Whereas formerly society has required subjects to renounce their private enjoyment in the name of social duty, today the only duty seems to consist in enjoying oneself as much as possible," an "imperative of jouissance" that Lacan famously illustrated by way of the neon-emblazoned "Enjoy Coca-Cola" sign he encountered while on the way to the talk he delivered at the famous structuralism conference at Johns Hopkins University in October, 1966.[58] This transition from a society based on the prohibition of enjoy-

53 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 183. On "too late capitalism," see Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy, or, the Style of Too Late Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2024).

54 Jacques Lacan, *Television / A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, ed. Joan Copjec, trans. Denis Hollier et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 32.

55 McGowan, *Racist Fantasy*, 42.

56 Quoted in Ben Quinn, "French Police Make Woman Remove Clothing on Nice Beach Following Burkini Ban," *The Guardian*, August 23, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/24/french-police-make-woman-remove-burkini-on-nice-beach.

57 See, for instance, "Wither Oedipus?," the final chapter of Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999), 322.

58 Todd McGowan, *The End of Dissatisfaction? Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 2; Jacques Lacan, "Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever," in *The*

ment to one that inexorably bombards the subject with the superegoic imperative to enjoy is what accounts for the fact that, as McGowan notes of the burkini incident, "Whereas decades ago authorities would force women to cover themselves on beaches, now they demanded that they take clothes off."[59] From this vantage point, it would seem that the problem with the burkini is that it signifies all too blatantly its wearer's rejection of the contemporary regime of the superego and its secular hedonist imperative to enjoy. Hence the authorities' aforementioned charge that the burkini fails to "respect good morals and secularism." Under the current logic of the superego, refusal to enjoy is understood not only as a moral failure, but also as a political threat to "our" secular "way of life."

And yet, as McGowan reminds us, because "all instances of enjoyment [. . .] involve an excessive relationship to the order of signification," the burkini at the same time functions as an ensign of the other's secret surplus-enjoyment.[60] Here we come upon what Richard Boothby has characterized as the "Janus-faced character" of fantasy.[61] Within the framework of the racist fantasy, the burkini doesn't merely signify the other's failure or refusal to enjoy, to adhere to "our way of life." On the contrary, in its very asceticism, the burkini simultaneously signifies the other's indulgence in a form of secret surplus-enjoyment that, to recall Copjec's words, "will not release itself in to the universal pool." McGowan underscores this very dynamic when he rightly notes that the burkini triggered the racist fantasy because the authorities saw in this article of clothing that "covered the body too much" a form of "excessive modesty" that bespoke an "excessive self-sacrifice" and "suffering" for one's religion that "equaled enjoyment in the minds of the French onlookers."[62] Within the frame of the racist fantasy, the burkini, however modest it may seem—indeed, *as a result of its very modesty*—cannot but appear as an excessive, superfluous object that signifies the Muslim

Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 194. The phrase "imperative of jouissance" comes from the following passage of Seminar XX, *Encore*: "Nothing forces anyone to enjoy (*jouir*) except the superego. The superego is the imperative of jouissance." Jacques Lacan, *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge 1972–1973,* trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 3.

59 McGowan, *Racist Fantasy*, 42.

60 McGowan, 44.

61 Richard Boothby, *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology after Lacan* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 275.

62 McGowan, *Racist Fantasy*, 43.

woman's *enjoyment* of her "capitulation to patriarchy," her "suffer[ing. . .] adherence to her religion's dress code."[63] This is why, much like the burka or hijab, the burkini was perceived as "a threat to French enjoyment" and a "menace" to "the French way of life," a phantasmatic threat which the banning of the burkini only served to "nourish" by "persuading people that immigrant women were the embodiments of [an] obscenity" that paradoxically "manifested itself in displays of excessive modesty."[64] The other is thus at one and the same time one who fails to enjoy and who *enjoys too much*, one who refuses to enjoy "our way of life," yet who is also said to have stolen and hoarded the very enjoyment upon which "our way of life" depends. Hence McGowan's conclusion that "As long as Muslims fit within the racist fantasy propagated in France, they will represent unrestrained enjoyment no matter what they do and no matter how they are attired."[65]

The sartorial superego is far from limited to France, however. A far more militant, far more sadistic, outburst of it occurred in the United States on August 5, 2012, when neo-Nazi Wade Michael Page opened fire on a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, killing six and wounding three others before turning the gun on himself.[66] Unlike many other white supremacists who have committed racially motivated acts of mass terror in recent years, Page left no manifesto. Thus, when questioned as to Page's motive in the immediate aftermath of the attack, Oak Creek Police Chief John Edwards replied, "I don't know why, and I don't know that we'll ever know, because when he died, that died with him [sic] what his motive was or what he was thinking."[67] Edwards's response is typical of the reflexive tendency among U.S. law enforcement and news media to frame such attacks as "random and unforeseeable" acts of violence committed by "lone wolves." As Rita Katz highlights, Page was "a buzz-cut forty-year-old Army veteran covered in white supremacist tattoos," as well as "a prominent member of the Hammerskins skinhead group and its Crew38 forum," where, in addition to other neo-Nazi websites and forums such as Vanguard News Network and Stormfront, he had "a clear history of posting explicit intentions to commit

63 McGowan, 43.

64 McGowan, 43.

65 McGowan, 44.

66 Page actually ended up killing seven people. In March 2020, a Sikh priest injured in the attack died of complications from his wounds.

67 Quoted in Rita Katz, *Saints and Soldiers: Inside Internet-Age Terrorism, from Syria to the Capitol Siege* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 27.

racial violence."[68] Reporting for the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), Marilyn Elias likewise notes that Page's Army service took place at the infamous Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, North Carolina, which in the late 1990s and early 2000s was well-known for being "the home base for a brazen cadre of white supremacist soldiers" who flew Nazi flags and played white power music that "endorsed the killing of African-Americans and Jews." Indeed, Page himself would go on to play in various white power rock bands in Orange, California, in the early 2000s, when the city stood at "the thriving center of the racist music scene."[69] As reported by Mark Potok (also of the SPLC), the music of many of the bands with which Page was associated was "incredibly violent" and "talk[ed] about murdering Jews, black people, gay people and a whole host of other enemies."[70]

But what was it, exactly, that prompted Page to attack a Sikh *gurdwara*? According to criminologist Peter Simi, who interviewed Page on multiple occasions between 2001 and 2003 while working on a doctoral thesis on white supremacy that laid the groundwork for his 2010 book *American Swastika: Inside the White Power Movement's Hidden Spaces of Hate*, though most of Page's hateful rhetoric was directed at Jews and Blacks, he also called Muslims "'towel heads,'" and he was "so furious after the Sept. 11 attacks that he thought the U.S. should just bomb Middle Eastern countries to smithereens."[71] Having spoken with Simi, the aforementioned Elias finds it "no coincidence" that the temple was just down the road from the restaurant where Page's ex-girlfriend worked. As Elias suggests, "Perhaps the turban-wearing Sikh men caught his eye because of the proximity," adding that "Sikh Americans are well aware of the danger of being targeted for hate crimes by racists who mistake them for Muslims."[72] Indeed,

68 Katz, 27.

69 Marilyn Elias, "Sikh Temple Killer Wade Michael Page Radicalized in Army," Southern Poverty Law Center, November 11, 2012, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2012/sikh-temple-killer-wade-michael-page-radicalized-army. Elias also reports in this article that an army buddy told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* that one of Page's many white supremacist tattoos was of the infamous "14 words" that members of the white supremacist group "The Order" are known to recite as their motto: "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for White children."

70 Quoted in Erica Goode and Serge F. Kovaleski, "Wisconsin Killer Fed and Was Fueled by Hate-Driven Music," *New York Times*, August 6, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/07/us/army-veteran-identified-as-suspect-in-wisconsin-shooting.html.

71 Elias, "Sikh Temple Killer."

72 Elias.

the first fatal victim of a hate crime committed in retaliation for the 9/11 attacks was a Sikh man named Balbir Singh Sodhi, who was shot to death outside the gas station he owned in Mesa, Arizona, on September, 15, 2001. In addition to proclaiming himself "a patriot and an American" upon his arrest, Sodhi's killer, Frank Silva Roque, publicly remarked at an Applebee's bar on the evening of the 9/11 attacks that he was "going to go out and shoot some towel-heads."[73]

In the cases of both Page and Roque, it was the turban as a fetishized, fantasmatic object thought to harbor an obscene surplus-enjoyment that steadfastly refuses to release itself into the universal pool that triggered the racist fantasy by serving as an instantiation of the sartorial superego. Let us recall McGowan's aforementioned point regarding enjoyment's excessive relationship to the order of signification. As he explains with respect to racial signification in particular, though "every racial identity seems distinct," the logic undergirding the racist fantasy "does not respect particular distinctions."[74] To illustrate this point, McGowan rehearses the following joke:

> A Jewish guy walks into a bar, sees the bartender, and exclaims, "Thanks for Pearl Harbor!" The bartender responds, "I'm Chinese, not Japanese." The Jewish guy says, "Chinese, Japanese, what's the difference?" The next day, he comes back to the bar. The bartender says to him, "Thanks for the Titanic." The Jewish guy is perplexed. The bartender explains, "Iceberg, Goldberg, what's the difference?"[75]

What this joke perfectly illustrates is the unremittingly binary logic of the racist fantasy, which reduces all difference to the very same "otherness." As McGowan remarks, "While different racial groups can take up the position of the subject or the racial other—a Korean subject and a Chinese other, a white subject and a Native American other, or a light-skinned Black subject and a dark-skinned Black other—racism is fundamentally a black and white issue, even when it doesn't involve Black and white."[76] This is why, so far as the white supremacist is concerned, there is no difference between a keffiyeh-clad al-Qaeda terrorist and a

---

73 Quoted in Simran Jeet Singh, "A Unique Perspective on Hate-Crimes: The Story of a Convicted Killer," *Huffington Post*, July 20, 2012, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/a-unique-perspective-on-hate-crimes-the-story-of-a-convicted-killer_b_1685020.

74 McGowan, *Racist Fantasy*, 49–50.

75 McGowan, 37.

76 McGowan, 49–50.

dastar-donned Sikh. The sartorial superego respects no such difference, for "in terms of the racist fantasy and its distribution of enjoyment, racism concerns only two races, that of the racist subject and the racial other. Even though those occupying the position can change radically, the structure remains the same."[77] Thus, the very structure of the racist fantasy precludes recognizing any difference between keffiyeh and dastar, let alone between Muslim and Sikh. Indeed, as with Althusser's Lacanian-influenced notion of ideological *méconnaissance*, according to which socio-symbolic interpellation is successful even, or especially, when one misrecognizes oneself as the subject of a given hailing, the racist fantasy, by structural necessity, functions even or especially when it misrecognizes its other, for *there can only be one other*. Hence the ability of the dastar to trigger the same superegoic response from Page and Roque as a keffiyeh. The logic at work here is the same as that of the racist in McGowan's joke: "Keffiyeh, dastar, what's the difference?" Once the dastar enters the frame of the racist fantasy, it becomes indistinguishable from the keffiyeh, reduced to the very same "towel" thought to harbor an obscene surplus-enjoyment that poses a threat to "our way of life."

It is thus no coincidence that both Page and Roque articulated their racism in expressly nationalist terms, with Page writing white nationalist songs in which he vowed to "fight for my race and nation" and Roque proudly proclaiming himself "a patriot and an American" for having killed a "towel head."[78] Faced with (what they perceived to be) the endangerment of the "national Thing," their sartorial superegos, triggered by the dastar as the ensign of an obscene surplus-enjoyment, commanded them to "Enjoy your nation as yourself!" and take back the enjoyment, the "way of life," they believed to have been "stolen" by the other.[79] In overidentifying with this sartorial superegoic command, they both, like Kubrick's Leonard, turned themselves into perverse, sadistic instruments of the Other's will to *jouissance*.

As Žižek stresses, however, if we follow the Lacanian axiom that "enjoyment is ultimately always enjoyment of the Other, i.e., enjoyment supposed, imputed to the Other," then "the hatred of the Other's enjoyment is always the hatred of

77 McGowan, 49.

78 Quoted in Goode and Kovaleski, "Wisconsin Killer."

79 For more on the "national Thing" and "enjoying your nation as yourself," see the final chapter of Žižek's *Tarrying with the Negative*.

one's own enjoyment."[80] This is why it does not go far enough to simply "point out how the racist's Other presents a threat to our identity," whether individual or national.[81] As with Clérambault's perverse photographs, "the fascinating image of the Other gives a body to our own innermost split, to what is 'in us more than ourselves' and thus prevents us from achieving full identity with ourselves."[82] Hence the inextricable link between scapegoating and the superegoic imperative to enjoy: in both cases, one disavows one's "own innermost split"—a split materialized or objectivized in the form of the *objet a*, the object-cause of desire that is "in one more than oneself"—by projecting it onto a fetishized other who all-too-conveniently comes to function as the agent of this division. This is the superegoic logic behind such Trumpian slogans as "Make America Great Again" and "Stop the Steal," the former of which has assumed an iconic sartorial dimension of its own, of course, in the form of the infamous red (or, in some instances, camouflage) baseball cap—the *envers* or "other side," as it were, of the colonial cloth of the other. Were it not for the interloping other, these nationalist mantras maintain, America would be able to enjoy (i.e., would be "great," "free," "white," etc.) again. What such mantras conceal, however, is "the traumatic fact that *we never possessed what was allegedly stolen from us*," that "the lack ('castration') is originary," that "enjoyment constitutes itself as 'stolen.'"[83] To (over)identify with the voice of the nationalist superego—a voice that, to recall Copjec, demands that all racial difference be subjected to militant "processes of 'homogenization'" and "'purification'"—is thus, ineluctably, to compromise one's desire, to betray that self-difference, that internal conflict, upon which the ethical freedom of the subject depends.

Pure Desire and the Ethics of Unruliness

This brings us back to where we started, with Copjec's insistence on "the sovereign incalculability of the subject," the subject's unruly status as "*self-governing*," "subject to its own laws."[84] As Copjec takes pains to clarify, this does not mean a subject "who simply does or believes as she wishes," or "who makes herself subject only to the law she *wants* to obey," for such a subject would be

80 Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 206.
81 Žižek, 206.
82 Žižek, 206.
83 Žižek, 203.
84 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 208.

"simply a variation on the theme of the calculable subject," the pathological subject (in the Kantian sense) of the sensuous/phenomenal. On the contrary, as Lacan himself stresses, the subject's sovereignty "culminates in the sacrifice, strictly speaking, of everything that is the object of love in one's human tenderness [. . .] not only in the rejection of the pathological object, but also in its sacrifice and murder."[85] The sovereign subject is thus a subtractive subject, a subject of the minus one, a subject who suffers for its fidelity to the law of pure, non-pathological desire, of "desire in its pure state."[86] Hence the pride of place Lacan grants to Antigone in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*.[87] A death-driven subject of pure desire *par excellence*, Antigone sacrifices her life rather than compromising her desire and surrendering her sovereignty, thereby demonstrating that the sovereign subject is one for whom, as Žižek is wont to put it, "freedom hurts."[88]

Still, why does Copjec insist that the "radically incalculable," non-pathological subject is "the only guarantee we have against racism," as well as our only "chance of protecting difference in general"?[89] Let us return to Lacan's warning about the "rise of racism" as a consequence of "our *jouissance* going off the track," or, as Copjec puts it, our "fetishization of private *jouissance*," the result of such fetishization being "ever smaller factions of people proclaiming their duty-bound devotion to their own special brand of enjoyment."[90] Lacan correctly predicted that this fetishization of one's own *jouissance* would give rise to "certain fantasies" about the other "unheard of before the melting pot" that is our global, multicultural world. As is all too clear from the instances of sartorial superegoic violence analyzed here, the racist fantasy remains alive and well, continuing to feed on the notion that the other enjoys in a way that is altogether different from ours—indeed, that poses a threat to our enjoyment, our way of life. Lacan's rather cryptic solution to this problem is to "leav[e] this Other to his own mode of *jouissance*," something he claims "would only be possible by not imposing our own [mode of *jouissance*] on him."[91] What does this mean, exactly?

85 Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 275.
86 Lacan, 275.
87 See Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 241–87.
88 Slavoj Žižek, *Freedom: A Disease without Cure* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2023), 124.
89 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 209, 208.
90 Copjec, 183.
91 Lacan, *Television*, 32.

As we have said, the racist fantasy functions by imputing to the other an obscene, excessive enjoyment; however, this supposed *jouissance* is nothing but a projection of the subject's own disavowed enjoyment. Hence Jacques-Alain Miller's assertion in his seminar on the Lacanian concept of "extimacy" that "There is no other enjoyment but my own."[92] When we comply with the superego and disavow our own enjoyment by attributing it to the Other, we become "ruly," "calculable." This is what Copjec means when she insists that the subject's sovereign incalculability, its unruliness, is our only guarantee against racism and our only chance of protecting difference in general. To heed the command of the superego is not only to erase all difference between others—as in the case of Page and Roque, whose sartorial superegos erased any and all differences between Muslims and Sikhs—but also to avoid one's difference from oneself, a self-difference, or non-identity, that paradoxically is the key to the subject's sovereignty and, in turn, its freedom.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the typical nationalist refrain with respect to the cause or motive behind the attacks was, "They hate our freedom." If, as we have seen, hatred of the other's enjoyment is always already hatred of one's *own* enjoyment, then the proper way to understand this refrain is to read it as a sign of the nationalist's hatred of their *own* freedom. In "mask[ing] the loss of the Other," covering up the fact that "there is no jouissance of the Other," the sartorial superego offers the nationalist a means of compromising their desire

[92] Jacques-Alain Miller, quoted in Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 203. Žižek is here quoting from Miller's unpublished lecture notes for the "Extimacy" seminar he gave at University of Paris VIII throughout the 1985–86 academic year. The line "There is no other enjoyment but my own" does not appear in the condensed, essay version of the seminar that Miller eventually published, but the essay does address racism's grounding in *jouissance* at length, as in the following passage: "Jouissance is precisely what grounds the alterity of the Other when there is no Other of the Other. It is in its relation to jouissance that the Other is really Other [. . .]. Racism is founded on what one imagines about the Other's *jouissance*; it is hatred of the particular way, of the Other's own way of experiencing jouissance [. . .]. Racist stories are always about the way in which the Other obtains a '*plus-de-jouir*': either he does not work or he does not work enough, or he is useless or a little too useful, but whatever the case may be, he is always endowed with a part of jouissance that he does not deserve. Thus true intolerance is the intolerance of the Other's jouissance." Jacques-Alain Miller, "*Extimité*," trans. Françoise Massardier-Kenney, *Prose Studies* 11, no. 3 (1988): 125–26.

and avoiding the very freedom they purport to cherish.[93] Were the nationalist to tarry with the negativity that is pure desire and traverse the racist fantasy, they would be forced to confront "the unbearable burden of a really free choice."[94] From the Lacanian perspective, nothing could be less free, or less ethical, than capitulating to the superego's image of the other's obscene enjoyment. To truly realize the freedom upon which the ethics of psychoanalysis rests—and upon which a truly antiracist politics must be built—another logic of the superego must indeed commence.

Data availability statement

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

References

Black, Jack. *The Psychosis of Race: A Lacanian Approach to Racism and Racialization*. New York: Routledge, 2024.

Boothby, Richard. *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology after Lacan*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Braunstein, Néster A. *Jouissance: A Lacanian Concept*. Translated by Silvia Rosman. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020.

Copjec, Joan. *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.

———. *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994.

Edelman, Lee. *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022.

Elias, Marilyn. "Sikh Temple Killer Wade Michael Page Radicalized in Army." Southern Poverty Law Center, November 11, 2012. https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2012/sikh-temple-killer-wade-michael-page-radicalized-army.

Fiennes, Sophie, dir. *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*. New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2013.

George, Sheldon. *Trauma and Race: A Lacanian Study of African American Racial Identity*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016.

———. and Derek Hook, editors. *Lacan and Race: Racism, Identity, and Psychoanalytic Theory*. New York: Routledge, 2022.

93 Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman*, 46; Jacques Lacan, *The Sinthome*, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2016), 43.

94 Žižek, *Freedom*, 60.

Goode, Erica, and Serge F. Kovaleski. "Wisconsin Killer Fed and Was Fueled by Hate-Driven Music." *New York Times*, August 6, 2012. https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/07/us/army-veteran-identified-as-suspect-in-wisconsin-shooting.html.

Katz, Rita. *Saints and Soldiers: Inside Internet-Age Terrorism, from Syria to the Capitol Siege*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022.

Kornbluh, Anna. *Immediacy, or, the Style of Too Late Capitalism*. New York: Verso, 2024.

Kubrick, Stanley, dir. *Full Metal Jacket*. Burbank: Warner Bros., 1987.

Miller, Jacques-Alain. "Extimité." Translated by Françoise Massardier-Kenney. *Prose Studies* 11, no. 3 (1988): 121–31.

Lacan, Jacques. *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Sylvana Tomaselli. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 2. New York: W. W. Norton, 1988.

———. *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*. Translated by Bruce Fink. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 20. New York: W. W. Norton, 1998.

———. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 7. New York: W. W. Norton, 1992.

———. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 11. New York: W. W. Norton, 1978.

———. "Kant with Sade." In *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Translated by Bruce Fink. New York: W. W. Norton 2006. 645–68.

———. "Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever." In *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*. Edited by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, 186–95. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972.

———. *The Sinthome*. Translated by A. R. Price. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 23. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2016.

———. *Television / A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*. Edited by Joan Copjec. Translated by Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson, and Jeffrey Mehlman. New York: W. W. Norton, 1990.

McGowan, Todd. *The End of Dissatisfaction? Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.

———. *The Racist Fantasy: The Unconscious Roots of Hatred*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2022.

Quinn, Ben. "French Police Make Woman Remove Clothing on Nice Beach Following Burkini Ban." *The Guardian*, August 23, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/24/french-police-make-woman-remove-burkini-on-nice-beach.

Resmini, Mauro. "Asymmetries of Desire: *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*." In *Unwatchable*, edited by Nicholas Baer, Maggie Hennefeld, Laura Horak, and Gunnar Iversen, 141–59. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019.

Singh, Simran Jeet. "A Unique Perspective on Hate-Crimes: The Story of a Convicted Killer," *Huffington Post*, July 20, 2012. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/a-unique-perspective-on-hate-crimes-the-story-of-a-convicted-killer_b_1685020.

Thakur, Gautam Basu. *Postcolonial Lack: Identity, Culture, Surplus*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020.

U. S. Marines. "The Rifleman's Creed." Accessed November 18, 2025. https://www.usmcu.edu/Research/Marine-Corps-History-Divison/Frequently-Requested-Topics/Marines-Rifle-Creed/.

Žižek, Slavoj. *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. 3rd ed. New York: Routledge, 2008.

———. *Freedom: A Disease without Cure*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2023.

———. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991.

———. *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*. New York: Verso, 1994.

———. *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

———. *Sex and the Failed Absolute*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2019.

———. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. New York: Verso, 1989.

———. *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.

———. *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. New York: Verso, 1999.

Zupančič, Alenka. *What* Is *Sex?* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017.

Filozofski vestnik
ISSN 0353-4510 | Volume 46 | Number 2 | 2025 | 141–62
 | DOI: 10.3986/FV.46.2.06

J. Asher Godley*

The Subject Supposed to Vote: Teflon Totemism and Democracy's Bad Timing

Keywords
psychoanalysis, limits of democracy, sovereignty, neighbor, election, Trump

Abstract
In chapter 6 of *Read My Desire*, Joan Copjec argues that the constitutive limits of American democracy reveal themselves symptomatically in the electoral choice of a conspicuously incompetent sovereign figure. In a leader for whom governing is exposed as an "impossible profession" (Freud), the Other's castration appears as a universal sign, which provokes an hysterical form of love even among would-be critics. This essay examines a crucial supplementation to this leader-group dynamic in the "neighborly" structure of voting. When a subject votes, she registers a signifier of her difference as a mark that both estranges her (by turning her difference into a data point) and also situates her in an equivalent alignment with other voters who are either "with" or "against" her position, enabling an imaginary mirror play. From this position of non-interaction and reflective doubling, the subject is invited to participate in a peculiar calculation with respect to what are known as "swing voters," a demographically constructed set of individuals whose presumptive action is thought to decide the nation's fate. This hypothetical "subject supposed to vote" is then considered such that the voter, as well as the candidate, adjust their actions based on the anticipated certainty of the fateful mark. In the election cycles that have come to dominate virtually every aspect of civic life, the imputed calculations of this little semblable (granted informational density through interminable polling and fantasized in racist caricature) exert a temporal pressure on democratic subjects that often forces hasty decisions. Through a comparative reading of Copjec's chapter with Lacan's essay "Logical Time," this essay concludes by interpreting the intersubjective logic behind this temporal forcing.

* Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, USA
James.A.Godley@dartmouth.edu | https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2788-8287

Subjekt, za katerega se predpostavlja, da voli: teflonski totemizem in nepravi čas demokracije

Ključne besede
psihoanaliza, meje demokracije, suverenost, bližnjik, volitve, Trump

Povzetek
V šestem poglavju knjige *Read My Desire* Joan Copjec trdi, da se konstitutivne omejitve ameriške demokracije simptomatsko kažejo v volilni izbiri očitno nekompetentne suverene figure. Pri voditelju, za katerega se vladanje izkaže za »nemogoč poklic« (Freud), se kastracija Drugega kaže kot univerzalni znak, ki sproži histerično obliko ljubezni celo med potencialnimi kritiki. Prispevek preučuje ključno dopolnitev te dinamike med voditeljem in skupino v »bližnjikovski« strukturi glasovanja. Ko subjekt voli, zapiše označevalec svoje drugačnosti z oznako, ki ga odtuji od drugih volivcev (s tem ko njeno drugačnost spremeni v podatkovno točko) in ga hkrati postavi v revitalizirajoč imaginarni konflikt z njimi. V tej neinterakciji pride do posebnega izračuna glede t. i. »neodločenih volivcev«, tj. demografsko konstruirane skupine posameznikov, katerih domnevno delovanje naj bi odločalo o usodi naroda. Tako volivec kot kandidat tega hipotetičnega »subjekta, za katerega se predpostavlja, da voli«, nato obravnavata tako, da volivec svoje ravnanje prilagaja vnaprejšnji gotovosti o usodnem znaku. V volilnih ciklih, ki so obvladovali praktično vse vidike državljanskega življenja, tovrstno preračunavanje tega malega podobnika (materializiranega v neskončnih javnomnenjskih raziskavah in fantaziranega v rasističnih karikaturah) izvaja časovni pritisk na demokratične subjekte, ki jih pogosto prisili k prenaglim odločitvam. S primerjalnim branjem Copjecinega poglavja in Lacanovega eseja »Logični čas« ta esej zaključi z interpretacijo intersubjektivne logike, ki stoji za to časovno prisilo.

∞

Bad Timing Keeps Happening: The Historicity of Unconscious Structure

As Freud observed long ago, the experience of chronology is subordinate to the peculiar logic of unconscious time, where everything that is essential remains in suspense. When, for example, a scene in infancy or the utterance of a fateful sentence gets snagged in the infinite loop of fantasy, it can be as though nothing ever changes. This is not because history determines our conditions of possibility but because there is something suspended in time for each speaking being

that has not yet come to pass. It is this that defines the *wish* that underwrites faith in historical necessity: *One* day, history promises, what *has been written* will give us the elusive knowledge we so crave; we will reach the end and finally know how we got here, whether through eros or exploitation, power or death, justice or ruin. Yet, when Lacan maintains that there is no sexual relationship that can be written, it follows that no such epistemic faith is supportable. Rather, it is only by way of confronting what does not stop *not* being written—what is traumatically impossible to inscribe in the historical scene of writing—that it becomes possible to trace a desire that would lead elsewhere than to a repetition of the same. Is it any wonder, then, that *Read My Desire*, a book that is so fine-tuned to the intricacies of psychical structure, might still be capable of giving us the news? To read Lacan "against the historicists" is to remind us that the historicity of structure is not subsumed by the stories we tell ourselves about history. What happened thirty years ago may still be taking place, not just because certain incidents are more or less significant *qua* "incidental" but because they touch upon what we, individually and collectively, continue to instigate, foster, or pseudo passively "endure" without so much as a pause, let alone break, in historical continuity.

Perhaps Copjec's most politically prescient example of this distinction between history and structure occurs in chapter 6, "The *Unvermögender* Other: Democracy and Hysteria." Here, she treats an issue that, unfortunately, remains ever relevant: Despite our democracy's vaunted emphasis on transparency and fairness, it is Americans' unyielding affinity for deceitful and incompetent would-be masters that dominates the political landscape. In the early 1990s, at the time Copjec was writing, the supposed anomaly was that a decade of well-documented instances of brutal executive overreach, outrageous lying, and gross incompetence had done utterly nothing to damage former President Ronald Reagan's reputation. Searching for a more contemporary analogue, Copjec could find no better example than real-estate mogul Donald Trump, a man who, exhibiting the same level of mendacity, ended up licensing a comparable portion of property in the public mind. In either case, the "teflon" effect had to do with the mass media's construal of knowledge as "referential," that calling card of historicism's faith in the episteme. So, Copjec writes:

> Toward the end of December 1989, major and local television networks all at once dispatched their camera crews and news staffs to Aspen, Colorado. What was the

> purpose of this not-insignificant expenditure of time and money? In each case it was to obtain one very specific image: that of the now-empty spot in front of Bonnie's restaurant where Ivana had confronted Donald Trump [over his flagrant affair with Marla Maples]. Now, it is precisely this imbecilic devotion to the referent that made television news the dupes in their battle with Reagan. So absorbed were the news staffs in pinning down the president's lies and errors—his referential failures, let us call them—that they neglected to consider the intersubjective dimension of the whole affair; they forgot to take account of the strength of the American audience's *love* for Reagan.[1]

Very little about this description is capable of shocking us now. It is almost *too* obvious. Like Reagan, Trump is a child of the broadcast media. Having spent most of his adult life deliberately courting notoriety, he knows how to make a scene. Indeed, that is why Copjec's example is so aptly chosen: We see plainly how the media hype machine need only mask its own participation in making its star appear larger than life to manifest the belief, not only of its already eager adherents, but even of his detractors, who find him amusing in their contempt. The media's "reality" trick is just to make everything else seem small. By reproducing the signs of a supposed normality—a parking lot at a diner, the dullest of "real" places—we witness the transcendence of the agent of history from this same contrived set of referents. At its best, the media commentators themselves become so absorbed in the parts that they play that they forget the very success of their dramaturgy. What appears as an anomaly, then, is only the stupefaction produced by denying one's own willing dupery.

The referent's main contrivance, as Roland Barthes describes it in his essay on the "reality effect," is its narrow literary formalism, the fact that it presents details as "purely summatory" and incidental to plot, character, or the more overt expressions of narrative tension. When, for example, Flaubert gives a florid description of the city of Rouen, the pictorial details appear as "the neutral, prosaic excipient which swathes the precious symbolic substance."[2] That we are prompted to understand such details as insignificant is, of course, precisely their significance for ideology. By turning time into a referential background,

---

1 Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 142–43; italics in original.

2 Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 143–44.

historicism thereby *de-logifies* it, making events seem to respond to only the most recent developments in a chain of incidents rather than being the effects of structural conditions. With Lacan, we can add that love is implicated in this naturalization process inasmuch as it falls on the side of ignorance, of not wanting to know too much about where and what we love: "the subject can't not desire not to know too much about the nature of the eminently contingent encounter with the other."[3] Such is the aspect of love that, in fading towards the resistance of the unconscious, might seize upon the referentiality of the leader's "trait" rather than the sheer contingency that defines the erotic encounter in its unconscious implication.

Of course, Copjec could not have known that this avatar of Reagan's teflonism would become President himself, let alone *twice* (as if, in a reversal of Marx, we go from farce to tragedy), but the fact that we can be struck with the weight of this prophecy surely indicates that, where the unconscious is concerned, stubbornness is more the rule than the exception. Copjec's point, which is integral to the systemic malfunction of democracy, is that beyond the veil of referential illusions something remains intact that we keep "banging our head against": the real wherein we encounter the surplus object of unconscious fantasy.[4] It is this factor that "allowed Reagan to be Reagan" or Trump to be Trump and "it was in this object—and obviously not in his statements—that his consistency was to be found. American [sic] didn't love Reagan for what he said, but simply because he was Reagan."[5] What historicists do not (want to) see and psychoanalysis exposes is that factual evaluations of statements are useless unless we take account of the fantasies that such statements produce. From the news media's "first draft of history" to the mystified present, Copjec's point is that we cannot hope to understand the problems of our democracy if we do not understand the unconscious structural logic that produces its symptomatic manifestations.

Drawing on the work of political philosopher Claude Lefort, Copjec underscores how the imminent threat of authoritarian breakdown is practically built-in to the representative logics of democratic participation. The dilemma is as follows: In a pluralistic society that enshrines individual liberty as its unassailable

---

3 Jacques Lacan, *Encore*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 145.

4 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 141.

5 Copjec, 143.

foundation, the demand of each individual to have his particular will recognized is bound to come into conflict with other particular wills, and so a representative is solicited who would preside over all differences.[6] However, this universalizing representative by definition is incapable of recognizing any particular subject's represented demand, let alone desire. Hence, the exceptional position of the leader conflicts with his status as answerable to the people, with the peculiarity that, unlike the monarch of old (whose finite body was veiled by the sacredness of his divine double, infinitely removed from mortal taint), the democratic leader manifests as a *conspicuously* divided subject.[7]

This structural indeterminacy means that the place of this would-be master is not simply an empty spot that can be occupied by an anonymous functionary, a bland operative who performs the part he is expected to play. Such a leader, Copjec implies, would be a more traditionally authoritarian one, a figure whose coming into power is declared, retroactively, to fully explicate the general will of the people. Upon such grounds of *election* (with all the equivocation of that word) he stakes his claim, perversely, to being the people's instrument. But the leader of (always already failed) democracy, on the other hand, is not a nobody but a nonsensical or obviously lacking somebody who represents the fact that no single signifier can occupy the representative position of all the enjoyments and privileges of a pluralistic system. That is what Copjec calls America's "hysterical solution": By embracing this failure and loving the ridiculous master who always shows us his lack, his supporters might themselves become his essential support, his phallic prop.[8] Typical specimens of democracy's leading losers look like variants of Dora's invalid father, whom Freud characterizes as *Unvermögender*, "without means"—such a leader is impoverished in his capabilities, incompetent, indecisive, or simply out of touch—and they gain the adoration of their supporters precisely for that reason.[9]

6 Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (London: Polity, 1991), 18–20.

7 For more on the "conspicuously castrated leader," see my essay, "The Con and the Primal Horde," *Cultural Critique* 122 (Winter 2024): 1–31.

8 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 150.

9 Sigmund Freud, "Fragments of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund* Freud, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 7:147; Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 149–50, 255.

Only such a modern-day fisher-king could represent democratic representation as such, because to be a leader for everyone is precisely to fail to be a leader for anyone in particular. To be sure, it also triggers a reaction which, at its extreme, gives us the leader of the contemporary instantiation of the master's discourse: a brazen idiot, who, in acting "anarchically," or without law, is loved for that very display of contemptuous immunity. We recall here the logic of sovereignty as Giorgio Agamben, among others, has indicated it: The sovereign as representative of the law is simultaneously its exception.[10] As *the* figure of the law, the sovereign is also beyond the law, so the problem of legitimacy is to reconcile this paradox, making the sovereign act appear as though it were in conformity with a greater symbolic order of legality. But in the cases where the lawlessness of the sovereign is allowed to ostentatiously trump the law, it can result in an entropic breakdown of the means by which society organizes itself. Indeed, this is how, according to the movement Hegel charts from the "law of the heart" to the "frenzy of self-conceit," the fragmentation of society is the logical conclusion of a process whereby the sovereign attempts to incarnate the law in the image of his own self, only for the law to succumb to the same aporias as those that confound the ego's attempts at mastery.[11] With Copjec, we observe that such entropy is already incipient in even the "mild" cases, where the democratic master, hiding behind the legitimacy of democratic rules and norms, nonetheless cannot hide, in the end, the enjoying idiot that he is.

Voting as Supposition and as Actuality: From Castrated Master to Semblant Neighbor

It is no surprise, then, that the process of selecting this figurehead is likewise riven with paradoxes. Among other possible examples, Copjec does not hold back from pointing straight to the contradictory premise of democracy's most sacred rite: suffrage. With the universal right to vote, each citizen is promised the chance to make their desire known, but the moment this right is exercised it becomes a statistic, one lonely tally amid a sea of other marks, stripped, therefore, of the particular meaning (let alone the unconscious knowledge) that

[10] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 15–29.

[11] Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 221–28.

motivated it. The sheer facticity of this finite vote-tally tells us all we need to know about the universality it belies: no amount of "ones" can hope to "add up" to all. While suffrage is, in principle, offered to all democratic citizens (albeit only relatively recently historically and leaving aside many contemporary forms of disenfranchisement), the totality of votes participates in the right of a majority not universally, not even in the limited sense of the universality of the citizenry of a nation-state. Some votes will not end up counting even as they are included in the count (i.e., those that do not succeed), but the principle of suffrage as a universal civil right encourages the sleight of hand that results in the assumption that the results of the vote indicate the free exercise of the will of the people as such, a problem that Alexis de Tocqueville famously identified with the "tyranny of the majority." Whatever the result, democracy enjoins the people as a totality to accept it as mandated law, through which the winning side oftentimes exploits the result as the "mandate" of the people.[12]

In her essay, "The Subject Defined By Suffrage," Copjec elaborates this point in reference to Lefort's idea that voting de-substantifies "the people" as a political category. Any *positive* project for a universal emancipatory politics suffers a fatal contradiction in electoral democracy because it registers as its "founding fact" the primary repression of the One, which ensures that it is not possible to determine the total image of a whole society. As a consequence, universality assumes a negative or non-substantial condition—that is, it stands for the very impossibility of a universalizing project, which affects each individual in the same way, namely, as a structural limit. Each instantiation of that impossibility, because it traverses the symbolic conditions which generate it, produces an alienating effect for which there is not always a clearly articulable or assignable political cause—the historicity of a people embedded in a particular time and place is always irreducibly partial, involving a complex accumulation of factors that overdetermine every election and its results. The language of politicians, activists, legal experts, interest groups, and so on, must prepare a "formal envelope," to borrow Jacques-Alain Miller's term for the symbolic contours of a symptom, for a demand to become a properly political one; that is, so that a general proposition that can be voted on, or a certain set of issues can be taken up by candidates. At every step in this process, something slips out of the frame of what

[12] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 239–41.

becomes articulated, every political demand is sure to miss what it initially aims at. Between the impossibility of the universal exercise of citizen suffrage and the impossibility of political language to adequately capture the mandate of the people, there will always be something left over for desire. In effect, nobody is ever satisfied in a democracy: This is democracy's constitutive condition as the alienating effect of the structure of language. Copjec puts this point in Freudian terms: "not only is the complete hypercathexis of the social doomed to fail, but so, in addition, is the total withdrawal of cathexis from the social onto the ego."[13] That is, some unremarked remainder cannot but disrupt both the body-ego of the individual *and* the social as a totality. This missing "one," the minus-one of the phallus, explains the anomia of alienation in American democracy: the sense of not fitting in or of being outside oneself is homologous with the experience of being included in the law but without being represented by it. One experiences being part of a social totality that lacks a complete body just as one has a body which lacks the "X" which would make it an integral whole.

In this sense, the subjective experience of each individual's alienation becomes the very measure of their proximity to the State—the citizen, like the resident alien, is outside-of-itself and beside-the-law, and this is true both individually and as the general condition of citizenship. This is what it means that democratic subjectivity is "castrated"—we are no more equal to ourselves than to our neighbors. To speak of democracy as a hysteric's discourse is not a mere figure of speech but a formal condition of the structures of political appearance, the semblance of a supposed social relation. The complicity of the hysteric and the master comes together in the truth that the master is divided, for it is from that locus that the hysteric demands the father's love, so that she can support it as its missing phallus. Notwithstanding the vast differences that separate fascists from fascist resisters, the figure of the castrated master unites them around a common pole of fantasy. We come here to what is troubling about Lacan's stinging reproach to the activist students of Vincennes: "What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master. You will get one."[14]

[13] Joan Copjec, "The Subject Defined By Suffrage," *Lacanian Ink* 7 (Spring/Summer 1993): https://www.lacan.com/frameVII4.htm.

[14] Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 207. See also, Jacques Lacan, "Television," trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson, *October* 40 (1987): 36.

Yet even were it recognized that democratic subjects are torn between contradictory demands to the point that adequate representation is futile, voting loses none of its vital urgency. This is perhaps the most enigmatic lesson Copjec draws from the analysis of the subject who votes: "It is, in fact, the differential between our demand and response, the very vanity of our hopes, that sustains them."[15] Thinking of this impossible encounter with the "vain" object of desire—the neurotic dilemma *par excellence*—we might ask: Why would this outcome imply *a return* to engagement rather than withdrawal? Or, to restate the question naively, if citizens are faced with the utter hopelessness of any affirmative answering of their wishes, why bother with democratic process at all? The answer that might spontaneously spring to our lips, especially in our circumstances today, would no doubt underscore the consequences of inaction. For in the competitive situation of democratic politics, if I do not at least *try* to make a renewed attempt to right its failings, then someone else will. Failing even the attempt, I might find myself in the unhappy position of being at the mercy of another who will decide in my place.

This threat of the Other who may decide in my place reminds us why the *Unvermögender* Other is not just a man without means but a castrated *master*. At the time of its founding, American democracy tended to equate taxation without elected representation to the threat of slavery under what the Declaration of Independence (1776) called the "absolute Tyranny" of English monarchy. As Susan Buck-Morss observes, the Enlightenment discourse of freedom upon which the founding fathers based themselves refused to acknowledge the African slave labor that made possible America's foundation and its civilizing mission—an unconscious repudiation that has direct implications for civil liberties.[16] The contradictory, partial notion of freedom at the basis of the franchise is itself a kind of "three-fifths compromise," the clause in the US Constitution that stipulates the partial humanity of racialized property upon which the formal rights of the citizen is predicated. That this compromised freedom might slip into the condition it decries should the right to vote not be sufficiently exercised becomes discernible in the objection to the reticent voter. The Other who *fails to vote* can, in this sense, intensify the felt estrangement of the voter who encounters her own imaginary double as a subject without a voice in the political process, precisely

15 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 150.

16 Susan Buck-Morss, "Hegel and Haiti," *Critical Inquiry* 26 (Summer 2000): 821–22, 832.

what the foundational right of suffrage was supposed to keep in check. In this perspective, not to vote is not just a non-response to the democratic system, nor a form of mute protest against its failures and inadequacies, but represents the constitutive subjection of every democratic citizen, voting or not. The intersubjective basis of political identification is here subject to a troubling sense of indeterminacy that cannot be resolved by adopting the position of the non-duped non-voter any more than it can by scolding the franchise's defectors.

Yet such worries about nonvoters are somewhat offset by the adversarial context of the two-party system, which makes even large populations of nonvoters irrelevant if a majority can be clearly established. Instead, the major cathexis of electoral anxiety, especially in the last two decades, are the "swing voters." A swing voter is someone whose effective vote would occur in a U.S. state whose prognosticative value cannot be reliably predicted by intensive polling, focus groups, or endless "horserace" commentary by mass media. It is a figure of a purely hypothetical sort, a *supposed* subject, since the swing voter is in-itself nothing more than a demographic construction made relevant in part through America's electoral college system, which apportions votes by state rather than directly awarding them in a national tally. As such, the swing voter only has significance before an election, for once the swing state is "decided," the swing voter immediately dissolves into the indifferent multitude, only to be revived again for the next round of prognostications.

The relevance of this supposed subject, in other words, converges entirely on the *anticipated certainty* of its vote, which is also the moment when its composite identity is revealed: is he or she red or blue, D or R, or, in today's imaginary polemics, a fascist infiltrator or a communist one? The fact that such a supposed subject can be reduced to a single letter proves its representative significance. Like one of Lacan's mathemes, it indexes the logical structure of the subject in a way that exceeds meaning precisely by marking its limit. In that sense, the presumed subject of the vote has the peculiar status of being both hypothetical *and* real, a supposed subject *and* an impossible one at the same time. Naturally, it causes a bout of hysterics.

The mass hysteria over the status of the swing voter resembles an anecdote Slavoj Žižek recounts from his youth in socialist Yugoslavia:

> All of a sudden, a rumor started to circulate that there was not enough toilet paper in the stores. The authorities promptly issued assurances that there was enough toilet paper for the normal consumption, and, surprisingly, this was not only true but people mostly even believed it was true. However, an average consumer reasoned in the following way: I know there is enough toilet paper and the rumor is false, but what if some people take this rumor seriously and, in a panic, will start to buy excessive reserves of toilet paper, causing in this way an actual lack of toilet paper? So I better go and buy reserves of it myself.
>
> It is not even necessary to believe that some others take the rumor seriously—it is enough to presuppose that some others believe that there are people who take the rumor seriously. The effect is the same, namely the real lack of toilet paper in the stores.[17]

What is useful about this anecdote is its isolation of the purely supposed subject of politics, which is retroactively constituted by an act that has not yet happened. Were this act to occur (hoarding of toilet paper), its occurrence would make the supposed subject into an actuality, a "concrete reality" (to use an approximate term) constituted by an act, and would moreover produce a real structural effect on the one who supposes such a subject, namely that, owing to the scarcity of means, he would not be able to effectively manage his shit.

The act, then, is at once precipitated by an "end" in actuality that forces the subject to a choice by dint of a structural causality *and* it is anticipated in the imaginary as effecting an eventual certainty, a definite change, and the only way to prepare for that change (that is, if one wishes not to be a prisoner of fate) comes down to calculating the implied action of an Other. Yet that calculation, in turn, depends upon imagining the Other as *another* subject who *himself* prognosticates an Other. The point of interest lies precisely here: for this supposed subject's *hypothetical* response to an imagined Other causes the original prognosticator to adjust his *actual* concrete action accordingly.

Let us call this hypothetical figure the *subject supposed to vote*. In the horse race of American electoral politics, he is the one of whom I most despair, the

17 Slavoj Žižek, "What Lies Ahead?" *Jacobin*, January 17, 2023, https://jacobin.com/2023/01/slavoj-zizek-time-future-history-catastrophe-emancipation.

"problematic American," whose behaviors and habits are carefully studied and dissected in the media and universities. It is he who commands the demographic challenges, provokes the quandary of statistical aberrations, and fuels the nightly chorus of anxious discontent among commentators. Confronted with the mystery of what he supposedly thinks or prefers, the perplexity of Americans grows, for we imagine that his missteps or bad decisions are the ones that might effectively cancel our own demands or, given the "existential" stakes so often evoked in recent elections, even invalidate the position from which it is possible to demand them. In a "forced" manner reminiscent of Pascal's wager, the consequence of the supposed action of this other subject is taken up in a calculation that concerns me, upon which my freedom depends. By considering him, I have thus banged my head against the wall of the intransigent obstacle upon which the social contract is constructed, where I must alienate a portion of my freedom—precisely, the mark which stands for my singular desire—for the good of the whole. For, in this scenario, the supposed voter becomes my double, my imagined rival. In its demographic constructions and referential scene-painting, media commentary stages the electoral frenzy over the supposed voter as if he were the prize in a territorial dispute.[18] Part of the significance of this doubling and aggressive imitation reflects the imagined sovereignty of the neighbor. When my neighbor's interests do not align with mine, a doubling occurs between the castrated body of the non-represented voter and the sovereign image of the citizen empowered to affect change through the tally. In this latter image, we can detect the image of the supposed voter as a decider of the election. The move from this hypothetical neighbor to his "fleshly" body, as in racism or class repugnance, registers biases and differences applying to the scene of the imaginary. The resulting questions: What group does the new leader constitute in its imaginary features and demographic characteristics? Is he or she the "true face" of America?

Forced Choice in the Absence of Recognition: Haste in "Logical Time"

How, then, do we account for the role of this transiently sovereign image of the "supposed neighbor" in the problem of elections, particularly as concerns the bad timing of the subject of democracy? We return here to Copjec's remarks.

[18] See Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror State as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 80.

Just after she mentions the problem of elections, she points to the distinctively American position that the defense of opinion, what Freud would call the "narcissism of minor differences," is the substance of the political community.[19] This form of narcissism was Lacan's direct target in his polemic against American ego psychology, in opposition to which he conceives, in Copjec's words, "a different notion of difference. Not one that demands to be attended to *now*, recognized *now*, but one that waits to be exfoliated in time and through a relation to others. This other difference will emerge only once our appeals to the Other have been abandoned, once we accept the fact that there is 'no Other of the Other.'"[20]

Before we get to what this "different notion of difference" might be, we should note Copjec's intimation here that the narcissistic differences cherished by Americans and submitted to the protective oversight of the democratic master tend to be proposed in *haste*—they must be recognized *now*—but this haste is deceiving because it is actually running out the clock. That is, so long as we Americans believe in the Other of the Other that lies beyond discourse, a master who could tell me what I want, the demand to have my desire recognized will have to wait until it pleases the Other to grant it. We might say that the quintessential American is Hamlet, whose famous indecision Lacan interprets as being stuck in the time of the Other.[21] Hamlet's problem is that he cannot fully subjectivize the consequences of his insight that "the time is out of joint," and thus, when he does finally act, it is only too late. Instead, he waits too long to be recognized, and then he rushes in when the Other proves to be blind to his provocations, as if he were ever on the verge of being left behind. Given this temporal asynchrony, then, when Copjec contrasts the time-blind narcissism of Americans to Lacan's notion of a difference that has to be "exfoliated in time and in relation to others," she appears to be alluding to a way of conceiving politics in terms other than those of the usual matrix of relations between the neurotic subject and the Other. If only implicitly, Copjec is referring us to Lacan's analysis of *logical time*.

In his essay "Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty," Lacan develops an analysis that depends on a form of intersubjective reasoning that,

---

19 Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and its Discontents," in *Standard Edition*, 21:114.

20 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 151; italics in original.

21 Jacques Lacan, *Desire and its Interpretation*, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2019), 315.

unlike the classical forms of logic, proceeds by way of marked hesitations and necessary errors. Following a method that bears a certain homage to Hegel's dialectics, he thus seeks to temporalize a form of reasoning that, while involving imaginary moments, locates them within a situation wherein the laws of language force a certain outcome. Lacan derives his formulation, his "new sophism," from a thought experiment called the "prisoner's dilemma": A warden calls up three prisoners and presents them with a challenge, promising that whoever solves it first will gain his freedom. Displaying five colored disks—three white and two black—he informs them that each of them will have a disk pinned to their back where they cannot see it but will be permitted to view the disks of his two fellows. In this, the dilemma evokes the gaze of the big Other in a paranoid mode, which knows who they are but without their knowing what he knows. This makes them neighbors or even brothers, in the sense of the "sons of discourse," as Lacan elsewhere describes symbolic fraternity.[22] To earn their freedom, these brother-neighbors must be able to give the warden—the judge and master of the prison, the father of the symbolic fraternity—a strictly logical account of how they deduced the correct color on their backs. The instructions concluded, each prisoner receives a white disk.

The solution to the dilemma is as follows: Upon seeing the two white disks on his fellow inmates, each of the prisoners makes a series of suppositions, which leads them from one stage to another in a process consisting of three moments—the instant of the glance, the time for understanding, and the moment to conclude. At each interval between these three logical moments, there is a marked vacillation, wherein a consideration of the other two subjects prompts a particular temporal response. The marking of these vacillations and responses as moments within a logical structuration of the prisoner situation is how Lacan turns the dilemma into his own "sophism" of intersubjectivity. Each response comes with a set of suppositions:

1. In *the instant of the glance,* all of the prisoners are able to surmise immediately that there cannot be two black disks. This establishes a logical exclusion that motivates a supposition: If there *were* two blacks, one of the prisoners would know he was white and would leave right away.

[22] Jacques Lacan, . . . *or Worse*, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018), 210.

Though false, this supposition is necessary because it logically leads to the next step.

2. *A time for understanding*, in which the thought occurs that if I were black, the two others would know they were white right away and would leave together immediately, but since I note their hesitation, I surmise that I am white. For Lacan, this tentative conclusion makes a speculative assumption that interprets this as a manifestation of the other subject's will, "as though it were written on a banderole: 'Had I been a black, he would have left without waiting an instant. If he stays to meditate, it is because I am a white.'" But just as I start to head out, I see the others head out with me, which leads me to pause, questioning whether in fact my previous supposition was false.

3. There is a *moment to conclude*. Seeing that the other two have also stopped, I am reconfirmed in my original hypothesis and proceed to the end of the operation. But right before this occurs, an anxious precipitation takes hold—where "I hasten to declare myself a white, so that these whites, whom I consider in this way, do not precede me in recognizing themselves for what they are."[23]

At this last moment, the assertion of identity makes the prisoner come to a logical judgment, but the gap of time in which he tries to grasp and apply it comes back in the subjective sense of *lagging behind*. This time gap has nothing to do with chronology but comes from a false premise generated by the very experience of knowing the conclusion is at hand, so that he realizes that if he has a black disk, the others will not need to stop and ponder but will immediately act on what they know. There is here a logical "forcing," a push-to-the-act. Interestingly, Lacan does not think the reason for this haste is directly about the inmate's concern for his imminent freedom as a matter of fight-or-flight survival. The problem, rather, is that if he lets the two others go ahead of him, "he will no longer be able to determine whether he is a black or not."[24] That is to say—and this is the issue that most concerns us here—he might not be able to recognize *himself* and might therefore end up being convinced by his neighbors of *being*

[23] Jacques Lacan, "Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty," in *Écrits*, 168.
[24] Lacan, 169.

the wrong color. To put it simply, the Other, in deciding my time for me, also decides my fate.

Again, it is important to note that this is not a psychological motive but a logical one—the constraint of the operation of arriving at the truth of the procedure overrules any merely interpretative gesture. By supposing a subject who might (not) give me the truth of what I am, I rush to a premature conclusion in hopes of surpassing my (*noticeably white*) neighbors. Lacan consistently highlights the segregationist logic of the symbolic fraternity, but to keep his points rigorously linked to the analysis of structural insistence, he restrains their powerful equivocal resonances without expanding upon them.

But then, in the final paragraphs, Lacan finally lets his guard down. We recall that the piece, published in 1945 in *Les Cahiers d'Art*, was meant for a collection covering the years 1940–1944, "dates significant to many people," as Lacan allusively puts it in the headnote; that is, the period of the Nazi occupation of Vichy France. Coming back around to the occasion at the end of the essay, Lacan ties his sophism to the dilemma of the recognition of the human. One need only recall a similar move in his contemporaneous postwar essay, "Presentation on Psychical Causality" (1946), in which he openly characterizes the Nazis as "the enemies of humankind" or in the "The Mirror Stage" (1949) when he rebukes existentialism for justifying a form of freedom "that is never so authentically affirmed as when it is within the wall of a prison," including the "concentration-camp form of the social link."[25] Lacan's target in "Logical Time" thus further expands upon the metaphysics of humanity's Nazi nemesis. As in the classical syllogisms that include, as if by chance, the assertion "I am a man," ("man is a rational animal," "Socrates is a man," etc.), Lacan makes the three logical moments of his sophism turn on the equivoque of the "human" presupposed by classical reason, thereby exposing their ideological equipage:

1. "A man knows what is not a man."

(This statement is purely imaginary, the sheer speculative leap of the would-be master.)

[25] Jacques Lacan, "Presentation on Psychical Causality," in *Écrits*, 123; and "The Mirror Stage," in *Écrits*, 80.

2. "Men recognize themselves among themselves as men." (i.e., as "whites").

(This is the dimension of understanding, wherein we can detect Hegel's dialectic of the master-slave as a game of symbolic recognition. Here, however, there is also a coming-to-awareness of intersubjective structure.)

3. "I declare myself to be a man for fear of being convinced by men that I am not a man."[26]

(Finally, there is a conclusion, which is almost an analytic insight but also very much not so. Having realized the structure, the subject sees his own reflection in the abyss that not only separates him from his neighbors but that, in matching them, makes them at once his compatriots and "fellow men" and also his potentially "inhuman" adversaries. Hence, this conclusion is chilling and serves to clarify why Lacan was hesitant to endorse notions of "fraternity" in analytic schools—the problem of getting beyond the Oedipus complex does not relieve us of the sense in which we are all "sons of discourse," hence, there is always the danger that this fraternal demarcation of one's "human" identity results precisely in segregation.)[27]

Recall that what gives the supposed neighbor power is that *I have consented to give him the meaning of my time*. If my neighbors can convince me I am not a man, it is because I fear there is an Other (of the Other) who will recognize them *before* me. I might lose my position. I might lose the sign that ensures that my life matters to the collective. Why? Because there was always something missing in me and no matter how hard I try it will never be otherwise. That hole in my structure, as in theirs, is infinite.

Here, Lacan brings us back to the incongruency we have been discussing and that also concerns Copjec, the minus-one that structures the democratic field and that motivates that hasty and anxious premature assertion, predicated in the electoral infrastructure of representative democracy, by the subject supposed to vote. In the third moment, the haste that divides the moment to conclude, the form of the "I" which rushes to be recognized also appears in the

[26] Lacan, "Logical Time," 174.

[27] Lacan, . . . *or Worse*, 210.

interval of its potential neglect. Yet this desire for recognition *is the same thing* that in my neighbor I vehemently reject, for it might lead him in his own haste to discount my very being. In this haste, something is necessarily missed, which is the cause for which my act has been purposed. If I try to return to what is missing in that act, I encounter the missingness of what remains "unremarked" in the mark. The scenario of the vote is thereby caught within the structural overdetermination of subjective division. As Copjec argues, "The subject of democracy is thus constantly hystericized, divided between the signifiers that seek to name it and the enigma that refuses to be named."[28] In confronting the result of the vote, which manifests as the division of the subject in the positive tally, the subject cannot but be alienated in that result, regardless of the electoral success of the demanded candidate or proposition.

In the anticipated certainty of the vote as a positive tally, the competitive haste of logical precipitation is therefore not limited to the opportunism of prognostication, nor to the exercise of suffrage as a liberal right, but at this single point of structure the impasse of the subject proves deeply compatible with the self-replicating aims of (failed) democracy. The urgency of the outcome exerts on the voter *a push to the act*. For the voter, such reproduction occurs because haste seeks to resolve its disturbance in an action that is calculated in a flash. But this conclusion, inasmuch as it is informed by the structurally determined appearance of the subject supposed to vote, would necessarily amount to a failed or bungled act given that its motive defaults to fantasy. This would be the case even if the outcome were preferred, given that any possible result of an election successfully fails to produce a representative mandate of the general will.

The ambiguity produced by haste explains why, in Lacan's demonstration, hesitations and errors are necessary moments of logical scansion, which, because they could not be anticipated in advance, require the development of a changed relation among the three prisoners who can only achieve freedom as the result of their mutual deductions in a contingent encounter. Yet it is always possible that one, and no more than one, of the prisoners will arrive at the wrong conclusion, thinking that he is a black when in fact he is a white, which would preclude him from belonging, but it would not therefore undermine the "I," which proves in this case irreducible. The possibility of this exception unmasks the

[28] Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 150.

hidden premise of the democratic assembly—there can only be a set of humans if at least one is excluded.

At the place of the exclusion of the human, the imaginary is hyperactivated in the image of the nonhuman, foreigner, enemy or, as Lacan indeed evokes here equivocally, the "black."[29] This imaginary semblance explains, to some degree, the entrenchment of contemporary media discourse in how the hole created by the impasses of the logical movements of the structure gets filled in by "polarized" or partisan rhetoric. During election years, the gap appears most visible when it is inscribed in the oppositional determination of two mutually exclusive opposed parties, and the terms of opposition are magnified and accelerated in the rush to act.

Yet, does Lacan in "Logical Time" suggest something like Copjec's evocation of the ex-foliation of difference in time, the possibility of an alternative democratic assembly? If we dispel the phantoms of haste or the supposed subject of the vote, might we clear the path for another logic, where, if we can be permitted to invoke the logic of feminine sexuation long in advance of Lacan's explicit formulation of it, we might propose that *not-all* are human . . .?

> Only the slightest disparity need appear in the logical term "others" for it to become clear how much the truth for all depends upon the rigor of each; that truth—if reached by only some—can engender, if not confirm, error in the others; and, moreover, that if in this race to the truth one is but alone, although *not all* may get to the truth, still no one can get there but by means of the others.[30]

If the experience of truth, of the human, say, can only be encountered in solitude, the fact that "not all" may arrive at the truth of their humanity—that it is possible, even necessary, to miss the mark—suggests nonetheless that it is only possible to know the truth of the social by means of other inhumanly humans. By their symptoms, ye shall know them?

---

[29] On this, I am partly drawing from Sheldon George's lecture "Lacan's Theory of Race: From Logical Time and the Raced Body to Foreclosure and the Deracinated Psyche" (Lack IV: Psychoanalytic Theory in 2023, University of Vermont, Burlington April, 2023).

[30] Lacan, "Logical Time," 173; my italics.

Does this hypothetical outcome, then, come close to what Copjec means by a time when democracy would free itself from the fantasy of the Other of the Other? For, as we do not need her to point out, the time for understanding this in America has not yet arrived. "We" cannot be said to be free of the fantasy of the *Unvermögender* Other so long as what constitutes this "we" participates in the intersubjective structure that conditions its appearance. To grasp Copjec's point about the possibility of extricating ourselves from the thrall of the castrated masters of democracy, in other words, requires thinking through the structural implication of being *with* others. For it is here that my *semblables*, my fellow Americans, seemingly remain at liberty not to be aware of their choices, whatever I might think about them. And yet, is it not that my freedom depends upon arriving that they too are free by suppositional means—that each of us seeks to arrive at the same conclusion, the same truth of the missing mark of our common not-all inhuman humanity? That is the question.

References

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.

Barthes, Roland. "The Reality Effect." In *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard, 141–48. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

Buck-Morss, Susan. "Hegel and Haiti." *Critical Inquiry* 26 (Summer 2000): 821–65.

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

———. "The Subject Defined by Suffrage." *Lacanian Ink* 7 (Spring/Summer 1993). https://www.lacan.com/frameVII4.htm.

Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and its Discontents*. In *The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents and Other Works, 1927–1931*, edited by James Strachey, 57–146. Vol. 21 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press, 1961.

———. "Fragments of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria (1905 [1901])." In *A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality, and Other Works, 1901–1905*, edited by James Strachey, 1–122. Vol. 7 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press, 1953.

———. "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (1921)." In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology, and Other Works, 1920–1922*, edited by James Strachey, 67–144. Vol. 18 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press, 1955.

George, Sheldon. "Lacan's Theory of Race: From Logical Time and the Raced Body to Foreclosure and the Deracinated Psyche." Keynote Lecture at Lack IV: Psychoanalytic Theory in 2023. University of Vermont, Burlington, April 2023.

Godley, J. Asher. "The Con and the Primal Horde." *Cultural Critique* 122 (Winter 2024): 1–31.

Hegel, Georg W. F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Lacan, Jacques. *Desire and Its Interpretation*. Translated by Bruce Fink. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 6. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2019.

———. *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*. Translated by Bruce Fink. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 20. New York: W. W. Norton, 1998.

———. "Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty." In *Écrits*, translated by Bruce Fink, 161–75. New York: W. W. Norton, 2006.

———. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." In *Écrits*, translated by Bruce Fink, 75–81. New York: W. W. Norton, 2006.

———. . . . *or Worse*. Translated by A. R. Price. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 19. Cambrdige, UK: Polity, 2018.

———. *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Russell Grigg. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 17. New York: W. W. Norton, 2006.

———. "Presentation on Psychical Causality." In *Écrits*, translated by Bruce Fink, 123–58. New York: W. W. Norton, 2006.

———. "Television." Translated by Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson. *October* 40 (1987): 6–50.

Lefort, Claude. *Democracy and Political Theory*. Translated by David Macey. London: Polity, 1991.

Toqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Žižek, Slavoj. "Slavoj Žižek: What Lies Ahead?" *Jacobin*, January 17, 2023. https://jacobin.com/2023/01/slavoj-Žižek-time-future-history-catastrophe-emancipation.

Filozofski vestnik
ISSN 0353-4510 | Volume 46 | Number 2 | 2025 | 163–81
CC BY-SA 4.0 | DOI: 10.3986/FV.46.2.07

Cindy Zeiher*

Schubert's *mise-en-abîme*: Reading Copjec's Literacy of Desire as One Already Spoken For

Keywords
Joan Copjec, desire, Jacques Lacan, music, Franz Schubert

Abstract
In honor of the thirtieth anniversary of Joan Copjec's important and influential text, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*, this essay explores how the psychoanalytic conceptualization of desire operates musically as much as linguistically. If the unconscious is structured like a language, then music is structured like a desire for a language to be already spoken for. Franz Schubert's evocative *lieder* literally speak about music's capacity to capture and tarry with desire as a force always to be reckoned with.

Schubertov *mise-en-abîme*: branje Copjecine pismenosti želje kot že izgovorjene

Ključne besede
Joan Copjec, želja, Jacques Lacan, glasba, Franz Schubert

Povzetek
V počastitev tridesete obletnice izida pomembne in vplivne knjige Joan Copjec *Read My Desire: Lacan Against Historicists* članek raziskuje, kako želja deluje v glasbi in jeziku. Če je govorica strukturirana kot govorica, potem je glasba strukturirana kot želja po govorici, ki je že bila izgovorjena. Schubertov evokativen samospev dobesedno govori o sposobnosti glasbe, da zajame in rokuje z željo kot silo, s katero je treba vedno obračunati.

∞

* Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha / University of Canterbury, Aotearoa / New Zealand
cindy.zeiher@canterbury.ac.nz | https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0575-4760

> For in considering the rights of man from the point of view of philosophy, we see the appearance of what in any case everyone now knows of their truth. They are reducible to the freedom to desire in vain.
>
> — Jacques Lacan[1]

> The veil of representation actually conceals nothing; there is nothing behind representation. Yet the fact that representation seems to hide, to put an arbored screen of signifiers in front of something hidden beneath, is not treated by Lacan as a simple error that the subject can undo; nor is this deceptiveness of language treated as something that undoes the subject, deconstructs its identity by menacing its boundaries. Rather, language's opacity is taken as the very cause of the subject's being, that is, its desire, or want-to-be. The fact that it is materially impossible to say the whole truth—that truth always backs away from language, that words always fall short of their goal—founds the subject.
>
> — Joan Copjec[2]

Mise-en-scène; or, Recognition All in Good Time . . .

Read my desire! This clamour for recognition is the plea of the subject to their Other, the most revealing and honest demand one can make to anyone, at least initially, or until one can find words to read *one's own* desire, only to find that desire was lingering there all along, waiting to be read and enacted to the letter. Why then is it so difficult—pre-analytically speaking—to read desire? It seems that although what presents as desire cannot be thought, it can nevertheless be spoken and thereby expressed. This is precisely Joan Copjec's charge: Express yourself repeatedly and your desire can be read by another who holds the desire to do so. This is a specific transmission which demands the rigor of making a different kind of knowledge—one in which the singularity of one's desire is

[1] Jacques Lacan, "Kant with Sade," trans. James B. Swenson Jr., *October* 51 (Winter 1989): 69.

[2] Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 35.

privileged—known, spoken and expressed. Moreover, in suturing the subject to desire, a struggle emerges from the repetition of its continual transmission.

Copjec's important work, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* is a praxis towards focusing on an unusual desire of psychoanalysis: music as that which is expressed extra-linguistically. When considering the question "What makes music, *music*, exactly?," we could argue that it is the desire of music to literally *be* read. Copjec frames architecture, film, history and the gaze as circulating the demand of desire to be read, and here I extend Copjec's demand to music. What does it mean *vis-à-vis* music to read desire as a compositional force? For example, one can only read Franz Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* (both the *lied* and the string quartet) simply from an ethical perspective because, from beginning to end, these compositions demand desire. That which lies beyond the notes are to be read in full-force as the heart of the ethics of psychoanalysis.

Copjec's method not to get stuck on repetitions of history is also the charge of psychoanalysis as a revolutionary force with which *Death and the Maiden* also sits in opposition to the lamentations of those who are stuck in the past, unable to move in the present and yet complicit in this very circular repetition. As Lacan says, "It should be noted that [the experience of psychoanalysis] sets us at odds with any philosophy directly stemming from the *cogito*."[3] Interestingly and somewhat perplexingly, Lacan elsewhere dispels the notion that psychoanalysis should position itself against universalisms:

> Psychoanalysis is neither a *Weltanschauung* [worldview], nor a philosophy that claims to provide the key to the universe. It is governed by a particular aim, which is historically defined by the elaboration of the notion of the subject. It poses this notion in a new way, by leading the subject back to his signifying dependence.[4]

Here the subject is stuck in a cycle of personal demise and subsequent renewal in which moments of fulfillment are temporarily sustained under the mandate of desire.

---

3 Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the 'I' Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 75.

4 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 77.

As a historian, Michel Foucault compels us to think of the past as sticky. As subjects who study and experience both the world and ourselves, our present discourses, although differing from those of past ages, always retain something of these past discourses, something which has stuck. For psychoanalysis, too, the past is always present and enduring. In spite of the difficulty the analysand faces as complicit in repetition of the past, this can nevertheless be reconfigured on the couch. Here, the stickiness of the past is redirected not towards becoming unstuck but instead towards a focus on the object one desires to be stuck to.[5] This, in turn, enables a realization that "stuckness" is not about possible release from an object but rather a matter of sliding unaware into another sticky position offered by the signifier. Lacan calls this metonymy, which is where Copjec's method begins with its simple command: *Read my desire!*

Despite being no easy task, it is one that sets psychoanalysis in a historical frame through its presumption that the metonymic procedure of history can be knowable to the subject. As Copjec claims, psychoanalysis is the "mother-tongue of modernity," having through a process of infiltration become its very condition.[6] The restless questions posed by psychoanalysis concerning desire and drive continue to inform the *zeitgeist* of the contemporary world, enabling us through history to lament its failures while continuing to afford it respectful if ambivalent intellectual, rational attention. Yet, amid such surface appearances, we remain troubled, having established links with all manner of philosophical, political, scientific and aesthetic topographies. We now well know that modernity posed so many questions which rendered us anxious that its project to rationalize, bedevilled with uncanny moments and monsters, continues to haunt our subjective (non)relation with the social bond. Here, attention to desire, read solely as an unconscious force and not as a moment in time, is necessary in order to understand what it means to be thrilled and awakened by desire without allowing *jouissance* to overtake its nourishment.

Unlike *jouissance*, desire can be mapped as a modest subjective project laden with bouts of anxious hesitation. It is more than a word-object. For Lacanians,

5 We could say that Copjec, while provoking us to develop a literacy of desire to know what one is repeating, nevertheless situates Foucault (the historicists) as distinct from the illusory position that there exists full liberation from "unstuckness."

6 Joan Copjec, "The Inheritance of Potentiality: An Interview with Joan Copjec," interview by Jennifer Murray, *e-Rea* 12, no. 1 (2024): http://journals.openedition.org/erea/4102.

desire is specific; it is precisely and singularly correlate to the suffering of the subject in that to know desire differently requires confrontation with or submission to its opacity in the name of reading it again and again. Here anxiety emerges as the closest the subject can come to the *object a*, the non-existent object serving as placeholder for that which is lost, never to be recovered. Copjec puts this well:

> Anxiety—again, like respect and terror—is not only not caused by any object, it is not even caused by loss/lack of object (which is why anxiety can be distinguished from disappointment, say, or grief). Rather than an object or its lack, anxiety signals a lack of a lack, a failure of the symbolic reality wherein all alienable objects, objects that can be given or taken away, lost and refound, are constituted and circulate.[7]

Anxiety, which Lacan defines as the only true affect that does not deceive,[8] is best understood as an overdetermination wherein the *object a* is revealed as a (known) fiction of smoke and mirrors. Anxiety is nevertheless a psychic intrusion. Here, Copjec draws attention to Lacan's commentary on Irma's injection: in facing anxiety it is better, whatever the cost, to try and defer the desire to know all, everything, even "the origin of the world."[9] Copjec's method develops a literacy of desire via objects just close enough to the subject to be affective—gothic vampires and unresolved Oedipal complexes. These all tantalize anxiety which, although in plain sight, still eludes us and can only be signified symbolically.[10] Copjec proposes that in order to reveal itself as desirable, desire harbors an irreducible aesthetic quality emanating from what must be prohibited. In this way, desire, as that which refuses linguistic realization, invites transgression of the law—whether determined through God, the name-of-the-father, or the law as significant other, "the name-of-the-partner," if you will. Insofar as this speculative position carries the refusal of desire to name, to put into realization a word-object, it is beyond the realm of historicism. Here Copjec offers a caveat to her novel theoretical provocation: Knowledge has not failed simply

7 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 119.
8 Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 41.
9 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 120.
10 Copjec, 121.

because saying it all is impossible, neither has it failed because (some) knowledges' exclusion from a system of signifiers can be easily dismissed.

It would seem that the first rule of Copjec's method of reading desire confronts historicism by its resistance to interpretation. For Copjec, desire can be read but not interpreted because only by resisting interpretation can the subject contend with their very limits in an apparent meaningless void. For desire to be read to the letter, insists Copjec, stay stuck to the meaninglessness of the drive in order to extract the meaning of desire. For the neurotic, being stuck in perpetual lack of knowledge, without falling into cynicism or giving too much ground to doubt, is a living nightmare requiring one's willing vulnerability to a literacy of desire which could very well take all the time in the world to read. This is the crux of Copjec's method wherein the very existence of desire is dependent on the subject's lack of knowledge.

Accordingly, any feeling or sensation has the capacity to be aesthetically presented beyond the context of its linguistic or visual counterpart on Copjec's analysis. In illustrating this I turn not to literature, architecture, photography or film (Copjec's preferred forms) but to their sonic counterpart: music. Insofar as the desire of the composer/musician to express feeling and sensation transcends technique, the listener must commit to a praxis of reading this desire as their own, even when this demands confrontation with the greatest anxiety of all: with death itself.

Schubert's "Evil" Music

> The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else.
>
> — Ernest Becker[11]

Schubert's string quartet No. 14 in D minor, known as *Death and the Maiden*, was completed in March 1824 as he was confronting his greatest personal prohibition—a premature death. Although not recognized at the time and published only after his death, this quartet is today considered one of the most powerful ever written.

[11] Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), ix.

The death march theme of the second movement is taken from his 1817 setting for voice and piano of Matthias Claudius' poem *Death and the Maiden*, in which the maiden's initial innocent enjoyment of youth is gate-crashed by an unexpected, terrifying visitor who induces her cataleptic inability to resist his embrace.[12]

Das Mädchen:	The Maiden:
Vorüber! Ach, vorüber!	Pass me by! Oh, pass me by!
Geh, wilder Knochenmann!	Go, fierce man of bones!
Ich bin noch jung! Geh, Lieber,	I am still young! Go, dear,
Und rühre mich nicht an.	And do not touch me.
Und rühre mich nicht an.	And do not touch me.
Der Tod: Death:	
Gieb deine Hand, du schön und zart Gebild!	Give me your hand, you beautiful and tender form!
Bin Freund, und komme nicht, zu strafen.	I am a friend, and come not to punish.
Sey gutes Muths! Ich bin nicht wild,	Be of good cheer! I am not fierce,
Sollst sanft in meinen Armen schlafen!	Softly shall you sleep in my arms!

The subtext to this song-poem might be read as how, in trying to regulate *jouissance* in the face of overwhelming anxiety, the subject is caught in the tension between neurotic repression and the pervert's disavowal. The desire of the figure of Death is gratification in taking the innocence of the Maiden away forever, a perversity not entirely constrained in the song's concluding funeral march. As a formalized gesture of the social bond, its steady pulse marks the Maiden's death, but its appearance in the major key refuses the traumatic by providing a soundscape in which foreboding remembrance is grasped alongside an alleviated sense of release rather than of horror, suffering, and remorse for a lost future. We no longer have any sense of the Maiden as embodied nor of Death as a figure to be reckoned with. She no longer inhabits the world with enunciations, love, or the reading of desire, while Death nevertheless remains coherently perverse in providing a fitting end to the Maiden's desire. Schubert's demand that

[12] This scenario also provides the narrative of his setting of Goethe's *Erlkönig*, a lyric poem in which a young child's plea to his father for protection from the mysterious spirit (father, son and unholy spirit), being ignored, leads to his death. A theme from this song, too, is included in the fourth movement of the quartet.

we read the desire of the Maiden and her alterity, Death, as his own could not be more eloquent.

What are we left with following the death of the Maiden? If we remain true to Copjec's method of reading desire, we might find a glimpse of the answer. Following the Maiden's death the world is no longer innocent and cannot return to how it was. From Schubert's perspective the notes on his manuscript remain unchanged and will hopefully endure, whereas he, together with performers and listeners, is caught up in a terrifying encounter with death and an ensuing strange sense of resignation in which there is no judgement towards the figure of Death. The Maiden cannot be resurrected through music because it is precisely its performance that has killed her. Musicians and audience alike are thereby enabled to read Schubert's desire as his composition commands us, as that of both the Maiden and her deathly Other which sticks to her. In this way we, the listeners, too, are complicit in killing an innocent victim. From such a position of guilt there can be no reconciliation other than to desire her innocence in vain.

Seven years later, in 1823, Schubert was in debt, deeply depressed, and suffering the adverse symptoms of syphilis and mercury poisoning. He nevertheless continued to compose, finding in the string quartet a perfect medium for conveying to the outside world his inner turmoil in reconciling the lyrical aspects of his life with not just the fear of death but his actual confrontation with it. As W. W. Cobbett observes, "the string quartet had now also become a vehicle for conveying to the world his inner struggle."[13] The result was Schubert's astonishing *Death and the Maiden* quartet in which the writing throughout manifests sudden changes from gently lyrical to fiercely dramatic in a semi-programmatic rendering of Claudius' poem. One cannot forget the Maiden's scream and the stranger's libidinal rage at the end of the exposition of the quartet's first movement, as they merge in an ecstatic crescendo; sex and death are united in horrifically beautiful, seductive and nostalgic music which in expressing the inexpressible offers a perfect trope with which to present Copjec's method of reading desire. The tension is maintained even in quieter interludes by a recurring undercurrent of driving triplets, culminating in the final movement's frenetic

13 W. W. Cobbett, *Cobbett's Cyclopaedic Survey of Chamber Music*, vol. 2 (London: Travis and Emery Music Bookshop Publishers, 2009 [1929]), 357.

tarantella or "dance of death."[14] The tarantella was a dance traditionally used as a treatment for madness and convulsions caused by bites from the tarantula spider, which perfectly encapsulates Schubert's desire to kill off his protagonist as a metonymic force with which to handle his own impending fate. The Maiden now fully inherits Schubert's desire, unable to fulfil her destiny through also dying too soon.

Even before actually facing his own death, Schubert was haunted by the probability of dying too young, which in psychoanalytical terms is the inevitable castration where desire ceases. Hence Schubert's clear demand that we read the desire of both compositions and moreover, like Copjec, read it to the letter. Furthermore, if we treat these compositions like a dream (the royal road to the unconscious) or a wish-fulfillment, then we can assume that they directly implicate the desire of the Other as illusive and meaningful. Thus, we might say that the Maiden's imminent death is not so much Schubert's ultimate horror as his acceptance of castration and lack in fulfilment of an unconscious wish for the Maiden to surrender to death. In order to read another's desire coherently, one must at least have cultivated a literacy of one's own desire through assuming the position of the subject-supposed-to-know: how to read one's desire; how unfulfilled wishes are located in the everyday praxis of life; how commands and requests are deferred so that desire can be expressed in objects and other subjects.[15] In these ways, one gives oneself ethical space in which to explore desire as a life drive enabling subjective ontological security. Here in the face of ultimate castration—death—one can cling on to the life-driven matter of fantasizing, all the while being safely sutured to the symbolic order as a necessary scaffolding on which to develop a literacy of desire. This coming to grips with castration cuts off excessive satisfaction (for the neurotic, at least) before it spills over into unmanageable anxiety (undoubtedly not that far off for Schubert at the time). In this way symptoms can provide satisfaction without always being, in the end, entirely satisfying. The dream—in Schubert's case provided by Claudius' poem—has the potential to be psychically freeing by offering a different relationship with the inevitable, one not based on immediate *jouissance* but rather on the articulation of potential freedom from the grip of *jouissance*

[14] W. W. Cobbett, *Cyclopaedic Survey*, 359.

[15] This is why it is crucial for psychoanalysts to undergo the process of analysis proper. Not many vocations demand that one endures what one will ultimately put another through.

implicit in lingering desire. A literacy of desire can be nothing else other than ethical, which is precisely Copjec's point. After all, once desire is fully spoken (that is, in true or full speech) it becomes identifiable and malleable. It is where freedom resides. Furthermore, if we remember that no explanation of castration is ever complete, we might say that in his compositions inspired by Claudius', Schubert *is* the figure of both Death and the Maiden.

Claudius does not tell us why the Maiden died, only that Death desired to tantalize her innocence, before possessing her entirely. From the perspective of being alive, facing one's inevitable death looms as the most shocking castration of all because it is our fate either to accept that one's freedom is necessarily contained by surrendering to castration, or to embrace denial of the effects of castration by fighting to protect the illusion that one has a choice in the matter.

For Schubert as for most of us, coming to grips with these harsh limitations is suffocating, hence his retreat into the text of Claudius' poem. Schubert's setting provides us with a musical reading of his desire as the ultimate non-choice of castration: *your fantasies or your life*. The poem has enchanted him precisely as a consequence of his relationship with the Other and his setting of it is an acceptance of castration but on Schubert's own terms: *death is inevitable and just out of reach, but I am going to reimagine it by scanning my investment in innocence, so as to reach a more comfortable conclusion*. This libidinally-charged creative project is both revealing and protective. Schubert is obviously both the figure of the Maiden fearing death before her time as well as the figure of Death, expressing his anger through murdering her innocence. The Maiden is curious about desire and perhaps flattered by the Other's desire for her. Here Schubert's composition can be read in tandem with Copjec's method of developing a reading of one's desire as a curious plea. Once we have this different knowledge of desire (via the transference psychoanalysis offers) we will never again be the same yet nor will we necessarily be radically different. When it comes to desire, no one is innocent, yet in life the only thing we are truly guilty of, as Lacan reminds us, is compromising (giving ground to) our singular desire. That is, in the final analysis (in the face of castration), have we done that which we sincerely wanted to? Schubert makes sure that this question is properly reckoned.

Innocence as "False Claimant"

Lacan's proposition that "the unconscious is structured like a language" entails that every wish is based on the law of the letter which can appear when least expected, especially when we grapple on the couch with the question of desire. Schubert, of course, was not analysed in this way, but we can say that his *Death and the Maiden* compositions are not so much an ethical drama of good *versus* evil as they are a stark portrayal of the libido's encounter with the Real in which the law not only fails but is traversed in the name of forbidden pleasure or when pleasure becomes law. Schubert's compositions convey his dreams of possibilities where things could be different for him. They enunciate the composer's wish to take control of death before it takes control of him and thereby give the unthinkable a representation in terms of musical utterance. Here for Schubert the Real is an imposition in which the domestication of the drive (Death) must take up the ethic of castrating the docile body of the Maiden.

What might it feel like to perform the figure of Death, to play or instrumentalize a characterization of that which desires pure and present evil opposed to the life force embodied in the innocent maiden? In Schubert's *lied*, Death is a dichotomous figure—a trickster ("I am your friend") but also a truth-teller of sorts ("softly shall you sleep in my arms"). Death speaks for itself plainly, leaving only room for immediacy, not interpretation. Death, it seems, is entirely immediate and sincere—after all, there is "happiness in evil," as Lacan proclaims.[16] We are witnesses to the Maiden's naïve libidinal enjoyment in the big Other's trustworthiness ("Go, dear"). Only when this ultimate beautiful soul begs to be spared ("I'm still young") is her vulnerability fully exposed to the listener. In Schubert's music we hear the Maiden scream out as she is pursued by Death, repeating in vain her shrill unambiguous demand, "do not touch me!" directed both at Death and us as witnesses. Insofar as the Maiden's demand is ignored, it is taken as an invitation to take up Death's *jouissance*, a poignant moment in which the link between mourning (one's premature death) and lack is made explicit.

We might at first think that "and do not touch me" has little to do with the desire of the Other. Or does it? Lacanians are well aware of the slippage that occurs between enunciation and what is enunciated as the meaning of what we say then

[16] Lacan, "Kant with Sade," 55.

slips beyond our control. To this extent meaning is determined by the Other and not always clear. Moreover, for the neurotic, meaning is murkily determined *in* the Other. Alongside demand, desire has little chance of being heard, let alone read. Perhaps, for the non-neurotic, not being heard is taken to be simply a mistake, whereas for the neurotic it feels disturbingly unclear and beyond one's control. Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* compositions make a plea for us to read his desire without his necessarily having to explain. Yet, being a frustrated neurotic, he is compelled to do so. Occupying the positions of both Death and the Maiden, Schubert's conflicting motives paradoxically ensure that his message, *Read me!—again and again!*, is a compositional offering where words and music align. The little other—the listener—is left in stunned silence by the composer's request for his desire to be read, for love to be both sinful and meaningful as a performance.

Copjec offers a caution regarding being imperceptibly drawn into the instability and constructedness of such performativity.[17] Referring to the horror of the vampire (that which devours innocence), she says: "the drying up of desire is the danger against which vampirism warns us, sending up a cry for the breast that would deliver us from this horror."[18] Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* compositions present a similar nightmare, in which Death devours the Maiden as an ultimate fetish object for the audience. They foreground the desire of Death as having exclusive possession of the Maiden, thwarting her dream of maintaining pleasure in the face of ignorant bliss and leaving behind only nostalgia for this lost object. Copjec's further observation on vampirism perfectly captures the Maiden's position regarding her fate: "Vampirism is located beyond this point where the child maintains itself in relation to a partial object, an object of desire."[19] Schubert's two compositions are not intended to deliver us from such evil, rather they are an inheritance left by him for musicians whose task is to help us face the horror of unreconciled death, a death-horror in which desire will eventually dry up.

17 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 128

18 Copjec, 128.

19 Copjec, 128.

Time is of the Essence . . .

We all (especially musicians and composers) draw upon what we know or have experienced and yet may not ever venture into beyond our musical subjectivity. This is the common ground shared by music and psychoanalysis, one which provides the libidinal foundation to music as essential in developing a literacy of the composer's desire. Composers and musicians are neither necessarily evil nor innocent but simply complicit in making the desire of the Other their personal (sometimes perverse) object of fantasy. Music can be anything: profound, dramatic, amusing, irritating, or subversive—an extra linguistic form to which the composer or musician is stuck. Furthermore, what keeps them stuck is not a sensation of imposed immobility, paralysis, but rather a preference for grappling with it. We all want our stuckness to be time-bound, that is, to have a conclusion, and this is the wonderful promise which music offers, an opportunity to emerge from being uncannily stuck in even the worst-case scenario. Copjec says we "stumble [. . .] into the dimension of the uncanny. The special feeling of uncanniness is a feeling of anxiety that befalls us whenever we too closely approach the extimate object in ourselves."[20] Copjec then makes her important claim from which desire must be read, that it is "overproximity to the 'extimate'" which determines that not only a literacy of desire is possible but also that indifference (in the sense of disidentification) to (the superego's) over-proximinity is absolutely necessary in enabling the subject's transformation, that is, enabling the subject in a sensation of redoubling, to harness desire as both within and outside of itself. The literacy of desire involves this strange evental time-loop in which the subject is caught and bound, while at the same time, through a lessening of the tension of over-proximity, able momentarily to integrate a different imago of desire, one which is listened for and listened to. In order for this revolution to take place, the subject must surrender to being stuck at a certain point in time while, as Copjec puts it, rejecting other options in order not to remain "stuck in place," and instead moving through it without condemning stuckness as a "world of destruction."[21]

Returning to Schubert's interpretation of Claudius's poem in light of this specific mobius maneuver, we might say that Schubert's "evil" music becomes unstuck

[20] Copjec, 129.

[21] Copjec, 131.

through a sort of fantasy, what Copjec refers to as an "illegal hesitation" in the presences of the uncanny.[22] The conjoiner *und* in the poem's title objectifies both *das Mädchen* and *der Tod* equally, thus ensuring that each becomes a claimant on the other and thereby wards off anxiety. That they exist in this double form is what allows access towards a literacy of Schubert's desire. The composer plays on this *und* by first expressing the distress of the girl pleading for life before moving on to death's desire not only for the maiden's demise but to be the reason for it. Interestingly, in Schubert's score the determiner *Der* is dropped so that now there is no specific qualification of *Tod*, nothing to identify it from the uncastrated universe of death—that is, death being the end of desire is in contradiction with Schubert's figure of death who not only desires but claims the forbidden "innocent" subject—which we can count on existing without requiring any qualifier. Here, death is a word-object which stands completely on its own, irrefutable in meaning, devoid of sartorial super-ego and where there is no Other of the Other. Death is and has the phallus and therefore unlike the Maiden does not need to regulate his body. Nevertheless, for two thirds of Schubert's *lied*, the Maiden is alive, so Death can only be interpreted in relation to her. Death gets off on the *jouissance* of innocence. Insofar as Schubert embodies both figures, the Maiden's imaginary status of lost innocence anxiously offers language whereas Death, in holding the ultimate status of the phallus, takes it away. Here, Schubert's score allows this ultimate non-relation between oneself and one's death to be expressed musically.

In Copjec's thought, time is always close to the subject's reading of their desire. For her, just as history is always in the here-and-now, so too is desire; indeed, that history begins in the present is its very desire. We can think the "now" of both history and desire as emerging from the enigma of when time seems to stand still. It is in these uncanny moments, Copjec offers, that one has the strange ability to bear witness to the structure of fantasy in repetition. It is via this deliberate and slow movement—where the past becomes part of the present in a short circuit of its own temporality—that we can track desire and thereby attempt a reading of it. For Schubert, capturing moments of both past and present achieves through music precisely the psychoanalytic charge to say everything by breaking the rules of social engagement by not thinking before speaking. Speech, like composition, can be deliberate and sometimes repetitive but not

[22] Copjec, 131.

always careful, deliberate, and formulaic. Both can catch us off guard and linger into more tangential, free-associative moments. In this way, music's fundamental rule, similar to psychoanalysis's fundamental rule, is to express something: You must say what you can.

In order to develop a literacy of desire, one must ask the tough questions posed by Copjec: With what is one complicit in being stuck and why is one clinging to this sticky thing? To put desire to work one has to experience loss—not just an everyday loss, but one which is transformative. Only then does one realize what one has, which for Schubert was music. However, before any such realization, one needs to have grappled with loss of identification. Returning to the notion that *Das Mädchen* and *der Tod* was also Schubert's dream, we might say that as a dream it was both a wish-fulfilment and a form of self-reproach. Through killing the figure of innocence in a dream, Schubert shielded himself from his death by being Death's temporary master. As Freud observed, there is a death in every dream yet crucial to most people is the sustained desire to live. Schubert did not want to know when his time might be up, hence in his dream Death, although the ultimate blow for the Maiden, initially presents merely as forbidden, fickle pleasure. For Schubert, his dream culminating in the dance of desire between Death the aggressor and the innocent Maiden represents a reenactment of the universal human condition which allows the subject to find themselves in the presence of the *object a*, only then to discover themselves vanishing. This is literally the death wish in every dream: to remind us of our desires and how we keep them at bay.

Copjec's method harbours the crucial Lacanian ethic of ensuring that the subject can live with a literacy of desire, and further, that this literacy is what guarantees their autonomy as an expression. Desire and autonomy are inextricably linked as a contradiction in that one is a subject unto the law of desire, a desire which violates autonomy. Schubert puts us—musicians and listeners—into the stuck position of reading his desire at times when he was either fearing or actually facing death, when, as Copjec suggests, the rights of the subject to confront the limits of language and one's freedom are reduced or reconfigured. In Schubert's music, such moments—little grooves which lie between words—create an intimacy in which the historical subject can invest and articulate a desire, notwithstanding that this is struggled to be spoken in vain. Insofar as Schubert's death wish for himself manifests in his music as a desire to identify with Death

the aggressor who refuses castration, we could say that through composing he regained the agency with which to plunge into death at any time or in no time at all. Here, death for Schubert becomes the life-drive enabling him to be the object depicted in his music.

Mise-en-abîme; or, Recognition in No Time at All . . .

> Desire begins to take shape in the margin in which demand rips away from need [. . .]
>
> — Jacques Lacan [23]

If Schubert had lived in the twentieth century and landed on Freud's couch, we could imagine Freud asking, "Is there someone in your life who wants you to be aggressive? Is there someone else who wants you to remain innocent?" The unconscious has the capacity to recognize the desire of the Other; that is, desires and wishes which may or may not necessarily be one's own but are nevertheless expressed in terms of rivalries, contradiction, aggressions, and so on, and which bear a relationship to lack and loss. Subjectivity has its enigmatic foundation in its own possible destruction, and furthermore, dreams provide the perfect conduit for this to play out: psychic grief, lost desires, overindulgence in *jouissance*, and lack. All of these signal something taken up in the imaginary but which cannot survive alone in symbolic time. Copjec cautions that getting stuck to time can be destructive and that, in gaining a literacy of desire, we must embrace the totally fantasmatic position that one has all the time in the world. Here, desire takes the guise of a vital force which can be sustained only insofar as life continues inexorably towards death, a hyperbolic position which nevertheless garners the truth that killing time is what formulates the very signifier which the subject must overcome in the name of desire. One gets to a position not of "I am where the Other is" but "I am where the 'I' is," where speech and the act become one's very name in a movement beyond consciousness. This is the very position where we can locate music as a desire of psychoanalysis, where as time passes something happens which is critical in identifying the discontents and discomforts of our subjective worlds. As a singular experience which allows us to face directly

[23] Jacques Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious," in *Écrits*, 689.

our alienation and the fantasies which are pleaded for it, music and philosophy share a similar vision.

In allowing the torment of desire to be an insubstantial leftover, a foreign tongue common to us all, the music-psychoanalysis nexus metonymizes the thing we have lost and hope to recover in the form of materializing wishes and dreams. Here we might say that in juxtaposing the question of desire as a form of knowledge, dreams are a fateful rendezvous with the moment of truth and manifest by ensuring that death is replaced with life, life replaced with murder, innocence replaced by savviness, old replaced with new, and love replaced with anxiety. The real for Schubert exists as a universal expression which, as music demands, is logical and which resists being ontologized yet without being completely linguistic. In counting on the object of history to fall back upon, Schubert is a historicist; and, as a subject prior to psychoanalysis, he is forced to confront his frailties and limitations in developing a literacy of his own restless desire (his rivalry with the Other) through the composition of music. What makes music *music* is desire, all in good time.

Restlessness haunts Schubert's compositions by confronting us with a loss of belief in the transcendent embodiment of beauty as truth. Yet, at the same time, Schubert longed for a world which embraced a desire for music as a conduit to read one's own desire. Lacan would characterize such a position with the following:

> [I]nsofar as desire is a desire for recognition, this is something other than a desire [. . .] this desire is a repressed desire [. . .]. It's a desire that the subject excludes insofar as he wants it to be recognized. As a desire for recognition, it's perhaps a desire, but, at the end of the day, it's a desire for nothing. It's a desire that is not there, a rejected, excluded desire.
>
> This twofold characteristic of unconscious desire, which, by identifying it with its mask, turns it into something different from anything that can be directed towards an object—we must never forget this.[24]

[24] Jacques Lacan, *Formations of the Unconscious*, trans. Russell Grigg (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 307–8.

For Schubert, recognition of the singularity of this desire lies between life and death, yet there is something radically unnameable about his very existence as a composer as he grapples with inevitable and imminent death. For all of us, as death draws ever nearer, the fear that things might get worse signals a loss of faith in the ability to not only read one's desire but even to listen for it. Copjec's method demands that we hold onto fidelity to listen for and read desire, at least theoretically, but I would say also clinically, to listen for the other's inimitable and irreplaceable voice which we all possess. We can think of Schubert as one of Copjec's historicists who ended his life in the most spectacular way by giving us these stunning compositions in which to listen for his desire and to claim the strange freedom that accompanies not knowing exactly when he will die. His music immortalizes the singular avowal of his testimony, this self-authorization of his experiences which embody truths of a deeply personal character. In psychoanalysis, too, there are often difficult moments: hesitations, false starts, mumblings, silences, various forms of impasse, and at times the giving up of the hope that anything meaningful can be said at all. It takes work from both analyst and analysand to facilitate a singular avowal such as "I feel," "I want," "I fear," "I love," "I hate," or simply "I." Such articulations—or *Listen to my desire!*—stake a claim to witnessing self-creation of an emergent self, of being a Copjec-ean secretary of one's desire, for which everyone possesses the credentials. Schubert's compositions encompass the many facets of desire in which space and time collapse at the edges of the voice of his desire to preserve his strange fantasy whilst at the same time leaving things to fate, and in these ways to express the inexpressible. After all, as Lacan reminds us, "The Other [. . .] [is] something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me."[25] Schubert, too, realized how we all uncannily live on the Other's watch and in the Other's time.

Acknowledgements

Concerning the music-psychoanalysis nexus, I am most grateful for my discussions with Nathan Gorelick, Rosemary Overell, Russell Sbriglia and Nick Derrick. As always, deep respect and admiration is reserved for Joan Copjec.

[25] Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 71.

Data availability statement

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

References

Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press, 1973.

Cobbett, W. W. *Cobbett's Cyclopaedic Survey of Chamber Music*. Volume 2. London: Travis and Emery Music Bookshop Publishers, 2009 [1929].

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

———. "The Inheritance of Potentiality: An Interview with Joan Copjec." *e-Rea* 12, no. 1 (2024). http://journals.openedition.org/erea/4102.

Lacan, Jacques. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Dennis Porter. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 7. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997.

———. *Formations of the Unconscious*. Translated by Russell Grigg. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 5. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017.

———. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 11. New York: W. W. Norton, 1998.

———. "Kant with Sade." Translated by James B. Swenson Jr. *October* 51 (Winter 1989): 55–103.

———. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the 'I' Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." In *Écrits*, translated by Bruce Fink, 75–81. New York: W. W. Norton, 2006.

———. "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious." In *Écrits*, translated by Bruce Fink, 671–702. New York: W. W. Norton, 2006.

Filozofski vestnik
ISSN 0353-4510 | Volume 46 | Number 2 | 2025 | 183–202
 | DOI: 10.3986/FV.46.2.08

A. Kiarina Kordela*

Euthanasia of Freedom and Sexual *Conatus*

Keywords
sexual difference, gender, freedom, identity, Lacan, Spinoza, *conatus*, real

Abstract
One of the *tours de force* in Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire* concerns the correlation between the Lacanian formulas of sexuation and the Kantian antinomies of reason. This paper traces the modern itinerary of *freedom*, from the dynamic antinomy (male side) and Kant's free public world Scholar of the Enlightenment, through Marx's democratic State as the locus of transcendent freedom, to Copjec's sex *qua* real, i.e., as a freedom that emerges out of the signifier's own non-symbolizable effects. Accordingly, today's gender and other identitarian self-proclamations—whose "*dico, ergo sum*": "I say, therefore I am" (Jacques-Alain Miller) endeavors to subsume one's being under the signifier and, hence, eliminate the real—amount to the euthanasia of freedom. Opposing this development, this essay proposes Spinoza's substance *qua* power of self-actualization and immanent causality, as well as the singular *conatus* (striving to persevere in one's one being), as key ontological concepts required to sustain the two intertwined aspects of the real as both (an impossible) pre-symbolic cause and (an increasingly prohibited, yet inevitable) post-symbolic effect.

Evtanazija svobode in seksualni *conatus*

Ključne besede
spolna razlika, spol, svoboda, identiteta, Lacan, Spinoza, *conatus*, realno

Povzetek
Eden od vrhuncev v knjigi Joan Copjec *Read My Desire* se nanaša na korelacijo med lacanovskimi formulami seksuacije in kantovskimi antinomijami uma. Članek sledi moderni

* Macalester College, Saint Paul, MN, USA
kordela@macalester.edu | https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2164-1777

poti *svobode*, od dinamične antinomije (moška stran) in Kantovega razsvetljenskega Učenjaka svobodnega javnega sveta, prek Marxove demokratične države kot kraja transcendentne svobode, do Copjecinega spola kot realnega, tj. kot svobode, ki se poraja iz nesimbolizabilnih učinkov označevalca. V skladu s tem so današnja spolna in druga identitetna samorazglašanja – katerih *dico, ergo sum*, »rečem, torej sem« (Jacques-Alain Miller), si prizadeva, da bi svojo bit podredil označevalcu in s tem odpravil realno – pomenijo evtanazijo svobode. Nasproti temu razvoju ta esej predlaga Spinozovo substanco kot moč samoudejanjenja in imanentne vzročnosti ter singularni *conatus* (prizadevanje za vztrajanje in ohranjanje v svoji lastni biti) kot ključna ontološka pojma, potrebna za vzdrževanje obeh prepletenih vidikov realnega kot (nemožnega) predsimbolnega vzroka in (vse bolj prepovedanega, a neizogibnega) postsimbolnega učinka.

∞

Euthanasia of Freedom

A *tour de force* accomplished in Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire* concerns the correlation between the Lacanian formulas of sexuation and the Kantian antinomies of reason, with the mathematic antinomy finding itself on the female side, and the dynamic antinomy on the male side. But before we approach sexuality directly, I would like to point out another correlation within Kant's own theoretical system, specifically one between his epistemology, as presented in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787), and his political theory, as presented in his famous short article "What is Enlightenment?" ["Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?"] published in the *Berlinische Monatschrift* [*Berlin Monthly*] in December, 1784. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the dynamic antinomy (male side) postulates that as a phenomenon in time and space, everything is subject to natural determinism, but, as a thing-in-itself where the categories of time and space do not apply, everything is free.[1] Turning now to Kant's political theory in his "What is Enlightenment?" we see that this postulate of the dynamic antinomy constitutes the matrix for his conception of enlightened democracy, with civil society constituting the world of phenomena—i.e., being subject to the law—and public scholarship the realm of the thing-in-itself, that is, of freedom.

[1] See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A 531/B 559–A 558/B 586.

In Kant's words, the "civil society" of "private citizens" functions like the world of phenomena, where you must "only obey!" the law,[2] while as "world citizens [. . .] in the role of a world scholar who addresses the public," you function as the thing-in-itself, being free to "argue as much as you will, and about what you will."[3] The rule of law applies only within civil society or, in Copjec's words, only in "the series of phenomena (or signifiers)"—where "there is no such thing as freedom," while freedom is relegated to the sphere of public scholarship, a sphere that "serves precisely [. . .] the function of limit" by means of which "the series of phenomena [civic society] [. . .] becomes a closed set."[4]

By grounding the socio-political edifice of the Enlightenment on the dynamic antinomy, Kant arguably secularized divinity (the thing-in-itself or freedom) in the form of the free public scholar. For, like Kant's thing-in-itself, the God of the monotheist Judeo-Christian tradition is the free cause outside time and space—the creator—causing or creating everything that exists within the determinism of time and space. However, half a century after Kant, Karl Marx revealed the religious secret of the secular democratic State of Enlightenment by showing that, rather than the public scholar, it is the State itself that occupies the place of transcendent freedom. For, like the Christian God, the State ignores all the differences of the individuals of civil society, such as "religion [. . . ,] private property [. . . ,] birth, social rank, education, occupation"[5] and, we may add, gender, race, and all other differences that today are labeled as "identities," so that "man leads, not only in thought [. . .] but in reality, a double existence—celestial and terrestrial," as, on the one hand, an "imaginary member of an imaginary sovereignty, divested of his real, individual life, and infused with an unreal universality" projected from the State, and, on the other hand, as a "profane being" or "private individual [. . .] in civil society," where he is determined by all possible differences.[6] For, "far from abolishing these *effective* differences, [the State] only exists as far as they are presupposed; it [. . .] manifests its universality only

2 Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals and "What Is Enlightenment?"*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Liberal Arts Company, 1959), 92.

3 Kant, 87.

4 Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 230.

5 Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 33.

6 Marx, 34.

in opposition to these elements."[7] As Hegel had discerned in his analysis of "the relation of the political state to religion," it is only by ignoring particular differences, such as those of religious "forms of authority and of faith [. . .] that the state [has placed itself] above the particular churches, [and] has attained to the universality of thought—its formal principle—and is bringing this universality into existence."[8] In this way, the "political state, in relation to civil society, is just as spiritual as is heaven in relation to earth."[9] It is this "universal" state above and beyond any religion that succeeds in becoming purely spiritual, thereby inheriting the gaze of Christian divinity for which everybody is supposed to be equal. In Marx's words: "In fact, the perfected Christian state is not the so-called *Christian* state which acknowledges Christianity as its basis [. . .] it is, rather, the *atheistic* state, the democratic state, the state which relegates religion among the other elements of civil society."[10]

In other words, Enlightenment means that freedom is possible, on the political level, only outside civil society—in the celestial or spiritual, imaginary and unreal level of the State—and epistemologically, only outside "the series of phenomena (or signifiers)"[11] or representation, which also means outside reason. In other words, the secular subject is condemned to a claustrophobic confinement within the law and/or representation, and freedom, then, can only emerge out of a discursive failure or, to recall Copjec's memorable chapter title, out of the euthanasia of reason. Read against this background, her *Read My Desire* can be seen as a struggle to replace both the free public scholar or critic *and* the State with Sex: Sex as the freedom of the subject that emerges out of the signifier's own non-symbolizable effects, that is, insofar as sex "is an effect, but not a realization of social discourses."[12] Through Copjec's audacity, Lacanian sexuality becomes the stronghold of the subject's freedom.

7 Marx, 33.

8 Marx, 33; citing Georg W. F. Hegel, *Grundrisse der Philosophie des Rechtes* (Berlin: Nicolaische Buchhandlung, 1821), 346. For an English translation, see *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942), 173.

9 Marx, 34.

10 Marx, 36.

11 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 230.

12 Copjec, 210.

The question then arises: What happens in today's era of identity's self-affirmation, in which, as Jacques-Alain Miller has pointed out, the Cartesian "*cogito, ergo sum*" has been replaced by a "*dico, ergo sum*": "I say, therefore I am"? This is a monumental shift from idealism to what I would call a constructivist ontology, insofar as the "I say, therefore I am" assumes that it suffices "to *say* what one is so as to *be* what one says."[13] This shift is not simply one from thought (*cogito*) to saying (*dico*) or the word, a distinction that in the last analysis, after Saussure and structural linguistics, may be untenable. What is at stake in this shift is a claim to both the fullness of being and its controllability, both of which being guaranteed by a presupposed absolute coincidence between being and signifier. To spell out this point: Descartes's thought is void of the content that is supposed to constitute his being: "I think, therefore I am" but I have no idea what I am. The most positive content given in Descartes's utterance is that "I think that I doubt everything," except for the fact that I exist simply by dint of the fact that I doubt—but what am I as a doubting I? Nothing more than a "thinking thing," which, to be more precise, is a radically "doubting thing"—which is why Lacan linked the Cartesian subject to paranoia.[14] Rather than accepting the Cartesian "cogito" as the means to assert "the validity of human reason," Lacan "returns to Descartes' radically skeptical assumption that all experience is an illusion, thrown up by a deceiving God," and by "substituting a deceiving ego for a deceiving God, Lacan claims that the mirror stage reveals 'the ontological structure of the human world,' in a way that 'accords with my reflections on paranoiac knowledge.'"[15] By contrast, the "*dico, ergo sum*" is a self-assured saying, certain of being in control of the content and form of my existence, capable of positing my being in any way I decide to posit it. As several Lacanians have pointed out, "there is no gap in this *dico*, between the thing said and the being supposed to be deduced from it, no place for the subjective division that the unconscious brings out."[16]

---

13 Anaëlle Lebovits-Quenehen, "L'Argument d'Anaëlle Lebovits-Quenehen," *3 Interpretations du thème de les 52es Journées de l'ECF: Je suis ce que je dis; Dénis contemporaines d'inconscient, Novembre 19–20, 2022*, https://www.causefreudienne.org/app/uploads/2023/04/J52-argument-ALQ-1.pdf.

14 See Lacan's doctoral thesis *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

15 Kay Stockholder, "Lacan versus Freud: Subverting the Enlightenment," *American Imago* 55, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 362; citing Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 2.

16 Lebovits-Quenehen, "L'Argument."

To return to Copjec's terms, with the "*dico*," the subject is fully subsumed under the signifier, there is no room for any non-symbolizable effects, no room for a Real, and, therefore, no room for freedom. For in today's era of ontological constructivism, subjects fervently surrender the totality of their being to the signifiers of their utterances. Utterances, by the way, that are entirely monological, as the Other cannot challenge a thing. Again, in Lebovits-Quenehen's words, "This identity which he affirms" with his:

> I am [. . .], and in which he recognises himself, is certainly first imposed on the subject of the *dico* himself, but he must then impose it on the Other whom he institutes as a witness to what he is. His own certainty must become that of the Other, and this to the point of dissuading this Other from questioning him: "*Insofar as I have said it, you have nothing to say*."[17]

Something which understandably raises the question:

> Why such an injunction to silence? Why must the declaration of identity be the last word, if not because the identity that is thereby affirmed is experienced as a wounded identity (by racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, fatphobia, etc.)? Actually, the being that emerges from the *dico* readily couples with its potential offender. This is why the *dico* aims first of all at the neutralisation of any word that could not only deny its identity, but even just question it or interpret the statements from which it proceeds. It thus takes note of the potentially striking, even hurtful effects of speech, but it extends this to any speech that would not be limited to confirming the statement from which the affirmation of identity proceeds.[18]

In other words, ontological constructivism is a form of totalitarianism. If Sex, as the subject's freedom, is the surplus effect of the signifier's own euthanasia, then the shift from sex to gender difference and all the other manifestations of identity politics entails the euthanasia of freedom—even the last vestiges of freedom that the reign of reason, rationalization, discipline, and governmentality have left us with.

---

17 Lebovits-Quenehen.

18 Lebovits-Quenehen.

This is a directly political concern, and since, as is clear from the above, the political is always intertwined with its own ontology, tacit or not, let us examine closer the chasm separating ontological constructivism with its discourse of gender identities from the ontological position of Lacanian sexuality.

Sexual Ontology

Addressing precisely this point, Alenka Zupančič turns to Judith Butler's conception of performativity as "a process in which socio-symbolic constructions, by way of repetition and reiteration, are becoming nature," that is:

> What is referred to as natural is the sedimentation of the discursive, and in this view the dialectics of nature and culture becomes the internal dialectics of culture [. . .]. Performativity is thus a kind of onto-logy of the discursive, responsible for both the *logos* and the *being* of things.[19]

I stress Zupančič's point that the ontology of performativity is one in which "the dialectics of nature and culture becomes the *internal dialectics of culture*," so that "the discursive [culture]" becomes "responsible for both the logos [culture] and the being [nature] of things." This is the logic of Hegelian dialectics that we very often also see in the thought of Slavoj Žižek, who argues that what appears to be a dialectics between two distinct parts (nature and culture) of equal footing turns out to be in truth the internal dialectics of only one of them (culture) so that the other (nature) is its derivative. Zupančič then proceeds to state that "to a large extent, Lacanian psychoanalysis seems compatible with this account, and it is often presented as such,"[20] since "[o]ne could say that for psychoanalysis, there is no being independent of language (or discourse) [. . .]. All being is symbolic; it is being in the Other."[21] To this explanation she adds: "[T]here is only being in the symbolic—except that there is real."[22] That is, the similarity between Lacanian ontology and that of performativity is only ostensible because of the real—and "it is here [in the real] that the sexuality that psychoanalysis speaks about is situated."[23] Yet, when it comes to specifying this real, Zupančič

[19] Alenka Zupančič, "Sexual Difference and Ontology," *E-flux Journal* 32 (February 2012): 3.
[20] Zupančič, 3.
[21] Zupančič, 8.
[22] Zupančič, 8.
[23] Zupančič, 5.

is content with a rhetoric of excess with regard to the symbolic order and its differential or combinatory logic, stating, for instance:

> The Real [. . .] is what irredeemably stains the symbolic, spoils its supposed purity, and accounts for the fact that the symbolic game of pure differentiality is always a game with loaded dice [. . .]. It is neither the remains of the sexual combinatory nor some aspect of sex that is entirely outside any combinatory. Rather, it is something that gets produced on top of any possible (or impossible) combinatory—it is what signifying operations produce besides what they produce (on the level of being and its regulation).[24]

Here we hear the echo of Copjec's aforementioned phrase that the real, just like sex, "is an effect, but not a realization of social discourses." Yet, if we want to extricate ourselves from the performative unilateral ontology that sooner or later reduces nature to culture, we must add that while the real and sex are the unrealized or unsymbolized *effect* of discourses, they are also what is *presupposed* for any discourse. The real must be conceived at once as the unrealized *effect* and as the impossible *cause* of culture, which is what leads Lacan "to define the real as the impossible," not unlike the impossible "*objet a* cause of desire."[25] If the real "acts as the out-of-jointness of the symbolic," it is precisely because even the distinction between cause and effect is non-existent on the level of the real. Unlike the symbolic, which is constituted in terms of oppositions, such as cause and effect or presence and absence, "there is no absence in the real," and it is only "the word [. . .] [that] creates the opposition, the contrast."[26] "Externality and internality," and any such "distinction[,] makes no sense at all at the level of the real," for "the real is absolutely without fissure";[27] in short, "the real is [. . .] undifferentiated."[28] If it can be said, as many have done, that in Lacanian theory it is the symbolic that introduces a "cut in the real,"[29] that "the Real is a

[24] Zupančič, 5.

[25] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 167–68.

[26] Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 313.

[27] Lacan, 97.

[28] Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 159.

[29] Evans, 159.

featureless clay from which reality is fashioned by the Symbolic" and that "it is the chaos from which the world came into being, by means of the Word,"[30] it is precisely because "the real is essentially that which resists symbolization."[31] In other words, the real *continues* to exist in spite of symbolization, before, during, and after it (i.e., eternally), as, to repeat, both the unrealized effect and the impossible cause of the symbolic. Moreover, being both the effect and the cause of the symbolic, the real is itself the cause of the symbolic, which is, in turn, the cause of the real; in short, the real is the cause of its own cause.

It was Spinoza who first introduced this causality in his monistic conception of substance, according to which all nature is God and both are One and the same substance, so that this "substance cannot be produced by anything else" and, therefore, it is "the cause of itself."[32] Being the cause of itself is what Spinoza calls immanent causality, as opposed to transitive causality, in which cause and effect are distinct, as are God and the world in any creationist conception. The creationist conception evidently operates according to the logic of phenomena in space and time or the logic of the symbolic order. By contrast, Spinoza's conception of divinity, in which "*God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things*,"[33] means that "God or substance is the ongoing activity of self-actualization," "the power of making itself actual," eternally,[34] outside of space and time, since in order to cause its own actual existence it must have existed before it started to exist. It is this infinite power of self-actualization that is the true referent of Zupančič's statement that "the Real [. . .] is the very [. . .] dimension that sustains the [. . .] 'vital' phenomena" Lacan refers to with terms such as "the libido or jouissance, [and] the drive."[35] What, exactly, does Lacan mean with these terms which he equates with the real? In Lacan's words, being or the real is what "survives any division"; it is "jouissance" or "libido, *qua* pure life instinct [. . .] immortal [. . .] or irrepressible [. . .] indestructible life [. . .] whose characteristic

30 Lionel Bailly, "Real, Symbolic, Imaginary," in *Lacan: A Beginner's Guide* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2020), 98.

31 Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 92.

32 Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 412, part I, prop. 7, dem. All quotations in English refer to the Curley translation unless otherwise noted in-text.

33 Spinoza, part I, prop. 18; emphasis in original.

34 Beth Lord, *Spinoza's Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 45, 21, 28.

35 Zupančič, "Sexual Difference and Ontology," 5.

is not to exist" precisely insofar as *jouissance* or the real is a sheer potentiality, the indestructible and irrepressible power of Being to actualize itself.[36] And at the same time that it is this indestructible power of self-actualization, *jouissance* is—due to the "link between libido and [. . .] the death drive,"—"drive."[37] And, as Lacan explicitly states, "the activity of the drive is concentrated in this *making oneself* (*se faire*)."[38]—that is, in the power of actualizing itself. The real *jouissance* or drive, at once death drive and "pure life instinct,"[39] is not created or produced, for it is itself the pure activity of making itself (*se faire*). In other words, *jouissance* is the cause of itself, not unlike Spinoza's substance.

And it is this *jouissance qua* real or "indestructible life [. . . that] is precisely what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is submitted to the cycle of sexed reproduction."[40] For the "real is distinguished [. . .] by its separation from the field of the pleasure principle, by its desexualization, by the fact that its economy, later, admits something new, which is precisely the impossible."[41] Since it is impossible for a sexed being to be its own cause, the real, which is self-caused, presupposes desexualization, and this is why, as mentioned above, we "define the real as the impossible," thereby acknowledging that "the opposite of the possible is certainly the real."[42] Miller stresses the asexual character of the real by juxtaposing any empirically possible enjoyment to the real *jouissance* which pertains to the "asexual real" and constitutes the "libido [. . .] of the real level."[43] In Lacan's words, substance or "being is the jouissance of the body as such, that is, as asexual [*asexué*]."[44] As Zupančič also reminds us: "nothing about (human) sexuality is natural, least of all sexual activity with the

36 Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 197.

37 Jacques-Allain Miller, "Transference, Repetition, and the Sexual Real: Reading the Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis" and "Silet," Lectures Given as Part of "The Lacanian Orientation" (1994–1995), unpublished. Text and notes have been edited by Anne Lysy, authorized by J. A. Miller, not reviewed by the author, 1995, 10–14.

38 Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 195.

39 Lacan, 198.

40 Lacan, 197–98.

41 Lacan, 167.

42 Lacan, 167.

43 Jacques-Alain Miller, "Transference, Repetition, and the Sexual Real," 10–14.

44 Jacques Lacan, *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–1973*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 6.

exclusive aim of reproduction."[45] Unlike sexual reproduction, in which the product presupposes both a cause other than itself and sexual difference, sex is the irrepressible power of Being to generate itself. Sexual reproduction takes place within duration, whereas human sexuality is metaphysical, pertaining, like Spinoza's substance and Lacan's *jouissance*, to the species of eternity.

These last remarks call for a further clarification. If the real is undifferentiated and, hence, asexual, then how can Lacanian theory claim, as Copjec does, that "sexual difference [. . .] is a real and not a symbolic difference,"[46] such as other differences in time and space? If the real is undifferentiated, must not the term "sexual difference" be an oxymoron? This apparent paradox is cleared away through the two orders of the real that are involved in its symbolization, a "process [that] is found in a part of Lacan's postface to the "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter' [. . .] where Lacan introduces the cause"[47]—as precisely an immanent cause—and which is theorized by Jacques-Alain Miller in his "class, *Orientation lacanienne*,"[48] and later recapitulated by Bruce Fink as follows:

> We can think of the real as being progressively symbolized in the course of a child's life, less and less of that "first," "original" real (call it R_1) being left behind, though it can never all be drained away, neutralized, or killed. *There is thus always a remainder which persists alongside the symbolic.*[49]

So that we can say

> that the symbolic order itself gives rise to a "second-order" real [. . .]. For the symbolic order, as modeled by Lacan [. . .] produces something, in the course of its autonomous operation, that goes beyond the symbolic order itself [. . . and] this allows us to postulate two different levels of the real: (1) a real before the letter, that is, a presymbolic real, which, in the final analysis, is but our own hypothesis (R_1), and (2) a real after the letter which is characterized by impasses and

45 Zupančič, "Sexual Difference and Ontology," 8.
46 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 207.
47 Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 27.
48 Fink, 182n11.
49 Fink, 26–27.

> impossibilities due to the relations among the elements of the symbolic order itself (R_2), that is, which is generated by the symbolic.[50]

This is another way of understanding immanent causality, that is, the fact that substance or the real is both the cause and the effect of its own effects (symbolic). On the level of human sexuality, the asexual jouissance pertains to the "first," "original," presymbolic, undifferentiated real (R_1), which, to repeat, "in the final analysis, is but our own hypothesis," as is Spinoza's substance as the power of self-actualization (a necessary hypothesis required in order to explain the existence of being in a non-creationist way).[51] Sexual difference, on the other hand, is "a real after the letter," generated by the symbolic's impasses and impossibilities, being "an effect, but not a realization of social discourses" or the symbolic, which is why "sexual difference cannot be deconstructed, since deconstruction is an operation that can be applied only to culture, to the signifier, and has no purchase on this other realm"[52] of the second order real (R_2). Parenthetically, for those familiar with or more interested in Spinoza's theoretical system, we could say that, while substance pertains to the first-order real (R_1), the second-order real (R_2) corresponds to what Spinozan scholars call "mediate infinite modes," that is, something that "must have necessarily followed [. . .] from [. . .] some attribute [of God or substance] modified by a modification which exists necessarily and as infinite,"[53] such as "the face of the whole universe, which, although varying in infinite ways, yet remains always the same."[54]

It is no accident that to go beyond the unilateral ontology of performativity and to grasp the real and, with it, the psychoanalytic conception of Sex, we, like Lacan, have to turn to Spinoza's conception of substance as the power of self-actualization and as the immanent cause of itself. As long as "Lacan invokes Hegel's view that 'everything which is real is rational (and *vice versa*)'," the term "real" "disappears from Lacan's work" and "it is not until 1953 that Lacan elevates the real to the status of a fundamental category of psychoanalytic theory."[55]

---

50 Fink, 27.

51 Fink, 26–27.

52 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 210.

53 Spinoza, *Ethics*, part I, prop. 23.

54 Spinoza, Letter 64, to Georg Hermann Schuller, July 29, 1675, in *Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 919.

55 Evans, *Introductory Dictionary*, 159; citing Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 226.

By contrast, Spinoza's substance *qua* immanent cause enables us to grasp what kind of difference the human sexual difference is.

Sexual *Conatus*

Copjec has long cautioned us that "sexual difference [. . .] is a real and not a symbolic difference,"[56] which, in Zupančič's words, means that "sexuality doesn't amount to producing sexual difference as signifying difference. In other words, sexual difference is a different kind of difference; it doesn't follow the differential logic."[57] Since differential differences among elements are determined through the negative relations among these elements, the non-differential difference in question must be determined not through negative relations. In juxtaposing Hegel—for whom "*omnis determinatio est negatio* [all determination is negation]"[58]—and Spinoza, Pierre Macherey introduces the concept of positive determination. In Macherey's words, "to determine something negatively is to represent it abstractly according to its limits, in separating it from God that acts within it"—i.e., ignoring substance or the real as its immanent cause—"and attempting to [. . .] relate it [. . .] to that which it is not," including to "its possible disappearance," which is why "we present it as contingent"—unlike the real which is indestructible and eternal. By contrast, "to determine something positively [. . .] is to perceive it [. . .] according to the immanent necessity that engenders it within substance, according to the law of causality that is the same one through which substance produces itself."[59] In this case, we "envisage it from the point of view of eternity, insofar as it is eternal, that is, insofar as it cannot be destroyed, other than by an exterior cause (*E* IIIP4)."[60]

Being the effect of eternal substance, the essence of every singular thing is eternal, and only its actual existence is finite and appears contingent. That is, in contrast to substance, whose essence necessarily entails its existence, singular

56 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 207.

57 Zupančič, "Sexual Difference and Ontology," 7.

58 Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, trans. Susan M. Ruddick (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 113; citing Hegel's phrase from his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.

59 Macherey, 141.

60 Macherey, 141; the parenthetical addendum is Macherey's reference to Spinoza's *Ethics*, part III, prop. 4.

"things do not exist necessarily," and, therefore, "their existence and their essence are 'determined' in completely different manners."[61] 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. In other words, "the same things are determined from different points of view,"[62] from that of eternity or their essence or potential, and from that of duration and the actual. "This is why the fact that singular things do not exist in eternity" on the actual level "has no effect at all on the eternity of their essence," that is, on their positive determination.[63]

The name Spinoza gives to the eternal essence of a thing is *conatus*—either left untranslated or translated as "striving" or "struggle"; from the verb *conor*, "to strive" or "struggle"—and Spinoza defines it as follows: "*Conatus, quo unaquaeque res in suo esse perseverare conatur, nihil est praeter ipsius rei actualem essentiam*."[64] Samuel Shirley translates this as: "The conatus with which each thing endeavors to persist in its own being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing itself." In another translation, by Edwin Curley, the statement reads as follows: "The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing." In short, the essence of a thing is its *conatus*, that is, its striving to persevere in its being—not generally to persevere but to persevere *in its being*. This is a fact that Spinoza stresses several times throughout his ethics in phrases such as: "Each thing, insofar as it is in itself, strives to persevere in its being."[65] Which is why "no thing can have in itself anything by which it can be destroyed, that is, it can annul its existence,"[66] which means that "no thing can be destroyed except by an external cause."[67] In itself a thing cannot be destroyed—it is eternal—whereas its destruction is possible only within duration where alone causes external to itself exist and can destroy it. For only within duration can a thing be distinct from, and possibly even opposed to, an external thing through, precisely, a negative determination. The realization that "determination can be understood simultaneously in a positive

61 Macherey, 173.
62 Macherey, 173.
63 Macherey, 173.
64 Spinoza, *Ethics*, part III, prop. 7.
65 Spinoza, part III, prop. 6.
66 Spinoza, part III, prop. 6, proof.
67 Spinoza, part III, prop. 4.

and a negative sense [. . .] does away with the traditional opposition of positive and negative,"[68] since it reveals that differentiating and counting distinct things is possible only within time, in the axis symbolic-imaginary, while from the perspective of the real there is no same and other or One and Two. In Spinozan terms, only the modes—substance's manifestations in time, where they are defined through negative determination—can they be counted, while the eternal essence of these same modes cannot. To return parenthetically to our earlier discussion, while modes exist in duration, and substance is eternal in the sense of the first-order real (R_1), the essence of a mode is eternal in the sense of the second-order real (R_2).

Translating the above back to our context means that the discourse on gender identities is concerned not with sex but with its modes, that is, precisely, the numbers of gender, its distinct and countable kinds, since it is only from within duration, within the symbolico-imaginary axis that one can distinguish, label, and count genders. This explains why Copjec argues that: "it was specifically the sex of *sexual difference* that dropped out when this term was replaced by *gender* [. . .]. For, while gender theorists continued to speak of sexual *practices*, they ceased to question what sex is."[69] To raise the question of "what sex is" means to be concerned with sex's ontology, its being or eternal essence, whereas describing and classifying practices of distinct gender identities is a different activity. As Mladen Dolar puts it:

> [T]he sexual difference poses the problem of the two precisely because it cannot be reduced to the binary opposition or accounted for in terms of the binary numerical two. It is not a signifying difference, such that it defines the elements of structure. It is not to be described in terms of opposing features, or as a relation of given entities preexisting the difference. One could say: bodies can be counted, sexes cannot. Sex presents a limit to the count of bodies; it cuts them from inside rather than grouping them together under common headings.[70]

What groups bodies together under common headings are their properties, that is, characteristics that are secondary to a given entity, which is precisely the

---

68 Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, 146.

69 Joan Copjec, "The Sexual Compact," *Angelaki* 17, no. 2 (June 2012): 31–32.

70 Quoted in Zupančič, "Sexual Difference and Ontology," 8.

concern of the activity describing and classifying practices of distinct gender identities. This is an activity that is part-and-parcel of the biopolitical mechanisms that administer life by precisely naming, labeling, and classifying it, as Foucault describes them.[71] This tendency is perhaps inevitable in a society such as ours that is so profoundly permeated by the reign of biopolitics, but what is truly detrimental is the further assumption that talking about the particularities of gender covers also the question of "what sex is," its ontology. For if one accepts this assumption, then one allows "sex [to] revert [. . .] to being [. . .] a secondary characteristic that, tired of playing second fiddle, now asserted itself as impudent swagger or naughty voluntarism."[72]

Far from being a "secondary characteristic" or property, sex is like an attribute of the Spinozan substance. "Extension and thinking" and all the other (infinite) attributes "are not properties of a substance, but rather [. . .] different 'ways' that a substance can be perceived," they are "*expressions* of the essence of substance."[73] This is why, in their radical difference, they are always also the same, since they are all expressions of the same substance. As opposed to gender, sex pertains to the real where identity and otherness overlap, as does infinity (or, for that matter, any number) and the One.[74] Accordingly, what Macherey says about Spinoza's God can be said about sex, namely, just like "God is not 'one,' any more than he is two, or three, or beautiful or ugly"[75]—sex, too, is not 'one' any more than it is two, or three, and so on. To enumerate genders is to rely on "our power to imagine, which creates a fiction, not simply of two, three, or any other number of substances [or sexes] but more generally of substances [or sexes] existing in a determinate number"—which is precisely what the "*dico*" assumes.[76]

71 Beyond Michel Foucault's three volumes on *The History of Sexuality*, see, for instance, his *"Society Must be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003); or *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008).

72 Copjec, "Sexual Compact," 31–32.

73 Lord, *Spinoza's Ethics*, 21.

74 Of course, this also means that from the perspective of R_1, to say that "no thing can be destroyed except by an external cause" (Spinoza, *Ethics*, part III, prop. 4) is no different than saying that anything is destroyed by an internal cause, since on this register the distinction internal-external does not exist. Nevertheless, on the register of modes and time, "no thing can be destroyed except by an external cause."

75 Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, 104.

76 Macherey, 104.

We could say about both Spinoza's attributes and sex that they are identical in their radical otherness, that is, "even if they are in reality distinct" or, rather, "exactly because they are in reality distinct, [they] are not like beings that could be enumerated, even in a perspective tending toward the infinite, because this would act to reduce their distinction to a modal distinction, that is, in a certain way, to think about the infinite from a finite point of view."[77] Any number, including infinity, is already a concession to the imaginary. Paraphrasing Macherey, to say there is a single or two, three, or how many sexes is to speak from the imagination that can only consider the absolute—the real—negatively, and, therefore, just like "Spinoza was no more profoundly a monist than a dualist, or whatever other number one wanted to assign this fiction,"[78] sex is no more One or Two or whatever other number one may want to assign the fiction of gender.

Ultimately, what eludes the logic of gender identity is something that generally eludes the logic of both the symbolic and the imaginary, namely, singularity—something which is to be distinguished from countable individuals or particulars. Speaking of the essence of a thing, Spinoza states: "That which is common to all things [. . .] and which is equally in the part and in the whole constitutes the essence of no singular thing."[79] The essence of each and every thing is singular and cannot be shared. Moreover, as we have seen, the essence of a thing is its *conatus*, that is, its power [*potentia*] to persevere in its own being, which, furthermore, when it comes to the human thing, is also its desire: "[d]esire is the very essence of man," "*Cupiditas est ipsa hominis essential*."[80] For psychoanalysis, the rule of singularity applies equally to sex and desire. Following Cesare Casarino's suggestion regarding *conatus* in general—"to each its own *conatus*"[81]—we can say, regarding specifically human *conatus*: *to each its own desire, to each its own sex*.

Last but not least, since on the level of the real there are no oppositions such as external and internal, and since the essence of a thing is its *conatus* or struggle

77 Macherey, 103.

78 Macherey, 104.

79 Spinoza, *Ethics*, part II, prop. 37.

80 Spinoza, part III, prop. 56, proof.

81 Cesare Casarino, "Grammars of *Conatus*: Or, On the Primacy of Resistance in Spinoza, Foucault and Deleuze," in *Spinoza's Authority*, *Volume 1: Resistance and Power in Ethics*, ed. A. Kiarina Kordela and Dimitris Vardoulakis (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 63.

to persevere in *its own being*, this *struggle* cannot be against something external to itself—as in the popular fantasy of a conflict between "men coming from Mars" and "women from Venus." This is a struggle within its own being, an *internal struggle*. And since "no thing can be destroyed except by an external cause," this internal *conatus* is not about survival even on the modal level within time. The *conatus* is an internal struggle for persevering in one's being which is at the same time constitutive of one's being. In Zupančič's relevant remark, sex is antagonism

> in the same way that for Marx "class antagonism" is not simply conflict between different classes, but the very principle of the constitution of the class society, antagonism as such never simply exists between conflicting parties; it is the very structuring principle of this conflict, and of the elements involved in it.[82]

Sexual *conatus* 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 with its identities, including my own "*dico*," may attempt to contain me. Sexual *conatus* is the struggle for this freedom.

Data availability statement

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

References

Bailly, Lionel. *Lacan: A Beginner's Guide*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2020.

Casarino, Cesare. "Grammars of *Conatus*: Or, On the Primacy of Resistance in Spinoza, Foucault and Deleuze." In *Spinoza's Authority*, *Volume 1: Resistance and Power in Ethics*, edited by A. Kiarina Kordela and Dimitris Vardoulakis, 57–85. London: Bloomsbury, 2018.

Copjec, Joan. *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994.

———. "The Sexual Compact." *Angelaki*, 17, no. 2 (June 2012): 31–48.

Evans, Dylan. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Fink, Bruce. *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

[82] Zupančič, "Sexual Difference and Ontology," 5.

Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*. Translated by Graham Burchell. New York: Picador, 2008.

———. *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*. Translated by David Macey. New York: Picador, 2003.

Hegel, Georg W. F. *Grundrisse der Philosophie des Rechtes*. Berlin: Nicolaische Buchhandlung, 1821.

———. *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Translated by T. W. Knox. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Edited and translated by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

———. *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals and "What Is Enlightenment?"* Translated by Lewis White Beck. Indianapolis: The Liberal Arts Company, 1959.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits*. Paris: Seuil, 1966.

———. *Écrits: A Selection*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: W. W. Norton, 1977.

———. *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Sylvana Tomaselli. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 2. New York: W. W. Norton, 1991.

———. *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge*. Translated by Bruce Fink. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 20. New York: W. W. Norton, 1998.

———. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, book 11. New York: W. W. Norton, 1981.

Lebovits-Quenehen, Anaëlle. "L'Argument d'Anaëlle Lebovits-Quenehen." *3 Interpretations du thème de les 52es Journées de l'ECF: Je suis ce que je dis: Dénis contemporaines d'inconscient, Novembre 19–20, 2022*. https://www.causefreudienne.org/app/uploads/2023/04/J52-argument-ALQ-1.pdf.

Lord, Beth. *Spinoza's Ethics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

Macherey, Pierre. *Hegel or Spinoza*. Translated by Susan M. Ruddick. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

Marx, Karl. "On the Jewish Question." In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, 26–52. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton, 1978.

Miller, Jacques-Alain. "Silet." Lecture given as part of the series "The Lacanian Orientation" (1994–1995), unpublished. Text and notes edited by Anne Lysy. Authorized but not reviewed by Miller. 1995.

———. "Transference, Repetition, and the Sexual Real: Reading *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*." Lecture given as part of the series "The Lacanian Orientation" (1994–1995), unpublished. Text and notes edited by Anne Lysy. Authorized but not reviewed by Miller. 1995.

Spinoza, Baruch. *Ethics*. In *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, edited and translated by Edwin Curley, 408–620. Vol. 1. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.

———. *Ethics*. In *Complete Works*, edited by Michael L. Morgan, translated by Samuel Shirley, 213–382. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2022.

———. Letter 64, to Georg Hermann Schuller, July 29, 1675, In *Complete Works*, edited by Michael L. Morgan, translated by Samuel Shirley, 918–19. Indianapolis: Hacket, 2022.

Stockholder, Kay. "Lacan versus Freud: Subverting the Enlightenment." *American Imago* 55, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 361–422.

Zupančič, Alenka. "Sexual Difference and Ontology." *E-flux Journal* 32 (February 2012): 1–10.

Filozofski vestnik
ISSN 0353-4510 | Volume 46 | Number 2 | 2025 | 203–28
 | DOI: 10.3986/FV.46.2.09

Ryan Anthony Hatch*

Sex: Trouble

Keywords
queer, trans, sexual difference, gender, negativity

Abstract
This essay sets out from the observation that, by and large, the Lacanian field has tended to celebrate Joan Copjec's "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason" at the expense of rigorously engaging with it. Indeed, Copjec's explosive text has often been taken—wrongly—as warranting both an indiscriminate dismissal of the entire project of queer theory (especially where it contests psychoanalytic theorizations of sexual difference) and the frequent confusion of transphobic countertransference with psychoanalytic thinking. Moving against this tendency, "Sex: Trouble" disencumbers the queer- and trans-emancipatory kernel of Copjec's argument—that is, that sex serves no other purpose than to serve no purpose—from the dimorphic and sometimes "cisnormative" terms through which this radical kernel is at once elaborated and undermined. Setting "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason" in dialogue with a number of queer and trans theorists, "Sex: Trouble" establishes Copjec's thought as an indispensable weapon in the struggle against the profusion of meanings that threaten to obliterate the negativity, the *nothing*, that sex *is*, and on which the freedom of queer and trans (read: all) subjects is staked.

Spol: težava

Ključne besede
kvir, trans, spolna razlika, spol, negativnost

Povzetek
Esej izhaja iz opazke, da je lacanovsko polje na splošno slavilo poglavje »Spol in evtanazija uma« iz knjige Joan Copjec *Read My Desire* na račun tega, da se ni zares strogo

* California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA, USA
rahatch@calpoly.edu

ukvarjalo z njim. Copjecino eksplozivno besedilo je bilo namreč pogosto – napačno – razumljeno kot opravičilo za brezpogojno zavračanje celotnega projekta kvir teorije (zlasti tam, kjer ta nasprotuje psihoanalitičnim teoretizacijam spolne razlike) in za pogosto pomešanje transfobnega kontratransferja s psihoanalitičnim mišljenjem. V nasprotju s to tendenco pričujoče besedilo osvobaja kvir in transemancipacijsko jedro Copjecinega argumenta – namreč, da je edina stvar, ki ji seks služi, ta, da ne služi ničemur – od dimorfnih in včasih »cisnormativnih« izrazov, skozi katere je to radikalno jedro hkrati razdelano in spodkopano. Pričujoče besedilo postavi »Spol in evtanazijo uma« v dialog z več kvir in trans teoretiki, s čimer Copjecino misel uveljavlja kot nepogrešljivo orožje v boju proti obilici pomenov, ki grozijo, da bodo izbrisali negativnost, ta nič, ki je spol, in na katerem temelji svoboda kvir in trans (beri: vseh) subjektov.

∞

for Joan, for everything

> Sex is the name for an elementary trouble, a trouble that besets the self-equality that underlies, in principle, the element—the part or the simple milieu [. . .] And it must be avowed: nothing about sex has been understood, even with mastery over all the phenomena of the division and recombination of gametes and also those of the attraction and the conjugation of all genders. If sex were ever to be considered as an element, it would be the element of trouble.
>
> — Jean-Luc Nancy, *Sexistence*[1]

Transsexual desires aren't either good or bad: they're *real*. Ideology has no antonym, and the ultimately aesthetic decisions that mark conformity to or departure from the dictates of gender norms are, in every possible sense, immaterial. The critical question is then not whether transsexual desires are appropriately counter-ideological but *what is to be done given that they have the desires they do*. What

[1] *Sexistence*, trans. Steven Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 92.

> demands do these place on the structure of the world as it stands?
>
> — Kay Gabriel, "Two Senses of Gender Abolition"[2]

1

Thirty years on, is there anything left for us to do with Joan Copjec's "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason," other than to go on celebrating its unsurpassed rigor and perspicacity, its unyielding fidelity to Freud's sexual revolution at a historical juncture that, on every last page of *Read My Desire*, Copjec diagnosed in the strongest possible terms as Thermidorian? Given the occasion for the present essay, this is a predictable enough question with which to begin. Yet behind it lurks a significantly more troubling and troublesome one, which I ask with extreme caution: Have we, in the thirty years since Copjec's essay first appeared, done anything other than celebrate it?

Or: To what ends have theorists writing on the question of sexual difference in Copjec's wake put her explosive argument to work, and what modes of engagement and lines of inquiry has it thereby not occurred to us (as either possible or necessary) to pursue? One of the great theoretical interventions of the twentieth century, virtuosic in its articulation of psychoanalysis, philosophy, and feminist politics, "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason" certainly has earned the apical status nearly every other major Lacanian theorist has accorded it. On precisely these grounds, though, it deserves more than our faithful, admiring echoes. Yet by and large, Lacanians have tended to restate its claims without repeating the gesture that alone legitimates them—for, however else we may wish to commemorate it, it is also a serious close reading of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*.

For Copjec and other major psychoanalytic feminists of her generation, the antipathy toward Freud that came to characterize so much feminist thought in the neoliberal era was in part the sign of a certain intellectual laziness, a refusal to distinguish the barbaric orthopedics that American ego-psychologists sought to pass off as the talking cure from the properly, traumatically emancipatory field of the Freudian clinic. It is therefore not a little distressing to witness several of

[2] "Two Senses of Gender Abolition: Gender as Accumulation Strategy," in *Feminism against Cisness*, ed. Emma Heaney (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024), 144.

Copjec's otherwise most subtle interlocutors take her landmark essay as authorizing the same kind of dismissive, unrigorous ideologizing it attacks.[3] If these interlocutors are to be believed, her text is not just a careful and searing critique of the so-called "poststructuralist" presuppositions that undergird the theory of gender and the signifier that Butler articulates in their very earliest work on the subject; rather, it amounts to the last word on the question of gender as queer theory poses it, if not on queer theory's challenge to psychoanalytic approaches to the sexed subject generally. It hardly needs to be said that this implies that *Gender Trouble* (or, at best, its author) can be taken as queer theory's last word on gender—a premise so obviously indefensible that it can only be explained as measuring the degree to which hetero- and cis-normativity yet haunt the scenes of psychoanalytic theory and practice. Or, to put this more pointedly, it indexes the ease with which some "straight Lacanistas" (as Calvin Thomas cheekily calls them)[4] not only accommodate such reactionary ideologies within their elaborations of Lacan's radical desubstantialization of sex but actually proffer the contents of the former as if they were logical expressions of the latter.

This is not all; in what strikes me as an inevitable slippage, these Lacanians' incuriosity regarding further developments in queer theory's *accounts* of gender translates to a dismissive attitude toward the *concept* of gender altogether. In practical terms, this sweeping rejection—not of one or more specific approaches to theorizing gender, but of gender as somehow an intrinsically false way of approaching the subjective and social phenomena it is tasked with naming—manifests as a refusal to take seriously the many profound ways that queer and trans collectives, through political struggle and the cultural work of world-building, have in recent years transformed the field of gendered embodiment. Reflecting on the "rather queer" way in which gender studies and Lacanian psychoanalysis "reach for each other," Shanna Carlson observes that, while gender studies is marked by "a profound investment in thinking through psychoanalytic claims about sex and sexuality," Lacanians "return [this] attention" only "from time to time." On those rare occasions when they do, as with Copjec's "corrective" readings of Butler, their responses "are not precisely reciprocal; [they] deal primarily

3 There are important exceptions to this widespread tendency: Shanna Carlson, Patricia Gherovici, Oren Gozlan, Jay Prosser, Mari Ruti, and Gayle Salamon.

4 See Calvin Thomas, "Lacanistas in the Stalls," in *Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Sexualities: From Feminism to Trans**, ed. Patricia Gherovici and Manya Steinkoler (London: Routledge, 2023), 244–61.

in psychoanalytic vocabulary [. . .] *without sufficiently identifying or attending to the rationale, or the desire, motivating Butler's concerns*."[5] I want to underscore this last observation as touching on something indispensable to any future psychoanalytic thinking that not only would not reproduce but would actively contest the field's long record of treating queer, trans, and gender variant subjects as objects to be theorized *in absentia*, from which Lacanians most certainly are not exempt.

The point of Carlson's important intervention is not to demand psychoanalytic theorists and clinicians strike a more "tolerant" or "inclusive" pose—in, say, the manner of the liberal non-politics of corporate DEI trainings, wherein merely rhetorical celebrations of difference lubricate the works of capitalist exploitation.[6] Yet, if we return to Copjec armed with Carlson's insight, we can make the following observations. There can be no doubt that her essay dexterously dismantles what we might call the correlationist, or mimetic, fallacy at the heart of Butler's deconstruction of sex-as-substance: the philosophically illegitimate "move [. . .] from the level of the concept to the level of being," which, "confusing a rule of language with a description of the Thing-in-itself," leads Butler to claim that, because signification is process without end—because the meanings that pool around *masculine* and *feminine* are ever subject to revision and indistinction—sex in itself is in flux, on the move.[7] The problem here, as Copjec carefully underscores, is not the "in flux" but rather the "in itself," which places sex somewhere in "the great Outside," an object to which the field of signifiers would more or less accurately correlate. This is a problem for Copjec not least because it posits a metalinguistic point of transcendence from which to verify the signifying chain's descriptive proximity to the Thing-in-itself, against which the entire development of critical philosophy militates. Insofar as the counterclaim that *sex does not budge* opens onto Lacan's account of sex as nothing

5 Shanna Carlson, "Transgender Subjectivity and the Logic of Sexual Difference," *Differences* 21, no. 2 (2010): 47; my emphasis.

6 And yet we ought to take seriously Kate Foord's assessment of the "clinic caught within the heterosexual matrix," about which queer and trans people are, with good reason, deeply suspicious, concerned as they are about "being returned immediately to a trashing of one's existence in the first encounter with a clinician, to being a 'transsexual' or a 'homosexual,' or of not being able to work out, from those first encounters, whether such a trashing is in store." Kate Foord, "Queeranalyst," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 3–4 (2016): 528.

7 Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (New York: Verso, 2015), 204.

other than the structural fact of language's falling into contradiction with itself, as the intrinsic failure of language on which every sense founders, it must also be said that Copjec's reading fails to address what most concerns Butler. In her painstaking exposition of "the stumbling block of sense," Copjec passes over what I take to be the primary objective of her opponent's text, which is to furnish an anti-essentialist account of "the multitude of meanings that try to make up for [the] impossibility" of sex, the "riot of sense" on which the subject's intelligibility to the social link hinges. While we have good reason to suspect that, as Slavoj Žižek suggests, there is something "symptomatic" about the way Copjec's argument "is silently passed over in numerous feminist attacks on Lacan," it is also plausible to read the deafening silence of her interlocutors as corresponding to her declining even to use the term "gender" in her critique of *Gender Trouble*.[8]

Setting aside for the moment whether their theoretical apparatus was adequate to its object—in a recent text, Kadji Amin plainly states that "in its linguistic idealism, Butler's early work cannot offer [. . .] a workable theory of gender"—Butler nonetheless wanted to ask: if it is no longer plausible to imagine gender as the epiphenomenal transcription of an innate substance called "sex," because such a substance has been determined not to exist except as an effect of the very discourses it was deployed to legitimate, then how are we to understand what it is and how it functions?[9] They were interested not only in discovering the logic of gendered meanings' flux, which led them to the model of Austinian performatives, but also in the widespread violence with which modern Western cultures police this movement in an attempt to contain and stabilize the referents of "man" and "woman." What is gender, Butler asked, if I can "get it wrong" (e.g., perform it otherwise, or "perform" the "wrong one"), and if getting it wrong can both feel right (as one condition among others of a livable life) and get me killed (as a consequence of my perceived transgression or illegibility)? These are obviously particularly exigent questions for queer, trans, and otherwise gender variant people. If "sex is the stumbling block of sense" falls short as an answer to such questions as *Gender Trouble* poses them, this it because it allows Copjec

8 Slavoj Žižek, "The Real of Sexual Difference," in *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*, ed. Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 74.

9 Kadji Amin, "We Are All Nonbinary: A Brief History of Accidents," *Representations* 158, no. 1 (2022): 106.

to leave unremarked Butler's basic observation that, for subjects whose way of inhabiting the impossibility of sexual difference both estranges and estranges them from the dominant forms through which culture interpellates us as man or woman, *sense itself* is not so much a stumbling block as a blockade, an obstruction erected along the path to a livable life, as obviously contingent and violent in its attempt to conceal its contingency as any police barrier.

This, then, is what concerns me. Copjec's landmark defense of sex as the limit-in-the-real of sense, as therefore that alone which holds open a space between the subject and the field of signifiers—in which, as ego, she is of course still compelled to make the kind of sense that will make her an object of power's calculations—strikes me at some fundamental level as necessarily on the side of queer and trans liberation. Where the anti-heterosexism of her argument is concerned, she says as much: "Sex does not budge, and it is not heterosexist to say so. In fact, the opposite may be true. For it is by making it conform to the signifier that you oblige sex to conform to social dictates, to take on social content."[10] Now, one could simply say that "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason" makes a *de facto* queer- and trans-affirmative argument because it makes a universalist one—because it posits sex as universally what guarantees the subject's freedom, where "freedom" means the subject's irreducibility to discourse (that is, to power). More precisely, we could join the chorus of Lacanians who have long insisted that the universal at stake in psychoanalysis avoids the pitfalls of the universalism through which the European imperial project violently "globalized" a certain set of particulars, since the former is a universalism of lack, an empty/structural principle, devoid of any content, and therefore neither more nor less "at home" in any particular cultural context.[11] This is, I think, precisely what Copjec has in mind when she asserts that the only way not to abet "the surrender of difference to [. . .] the [. . .] crimes against otherness with which the rise of racism has begun to acquaint us" is to fight for a concept of sex as the real that subtracts the subject from the field of signification.[12] Indeed, the *subtractive* universal at stake in psychoanalysis theoretically not only avoids the destructive

[10] Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 211.

[11] See Todd McGowan, *Universality and Identity Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020). See also Bobby Benedicto, "Queer Beyond Repair: Psychoanalysis and the Case for Negativity in Queer of Color Critique," *Postmodern Culture* 33, no. 2–3 (2023).

[12] Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 208.

violence of humanism's substantive universal, it offers us an analytic framework by which to account for this very violence.[13]

Yet, if there is a properly emancipatory element at the heart of Copjec's argument that can and should be placed in the service of antihomophobic and antitransphobic struggle, there is also a great deal else in it that considerably undermines any such effort. When, for instance, in the course of mapping the logical isomorphism of Kant's antinomies of reason and Lacan's formulas of sexuation, she refers to "*psychoanalysis's division of all subjects into two mutually exclusive classes: male and female,*" we must object that it is not psychoanalysis, but rather a vast, well-documented history of colonialist, white-supremacist, and broadly trans-misogynist state violence that seeks (in vain) to carve humanity up into two mutually exclusive sex classes.[14] Consider, briefly, the fate of the *hijras* of the Northwestern Provinces of colonial India. For trans historian Jules Gill-Peterson, the *hijras* are some of the first victims of trans misogyny, which emerges in the second half of the nineteenth century as "a mode of colonial statecraft" by means of which "a staggering array of non-Western cultures have been irreparably marked by the reductive violence of colonialism, which included the enforcement of a male/female sex binary in which trans life acquired its present association with boundary crossing."[15] Perceiving them as a constitutionally ungovernable threat to the *Raj* (on account of their excessive, incorrigible femininity), British authorities devised the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 (CTA), in part to render the *hijra* way of life illegal, with the explicit aim of hastening the "extinction" of a population whose demise they considered inevitable. More specifically, *hijras* found themselves construed as prostitutes and charged with the crime of "sodomy"—not because the authorities possessed evidence of illicit sexual activity, but simply insofar as these ascetics "lived [. . .] at a great distance from British notions of gender, family, and religion," which distance, in the colonizer's view, was evidence enough to effectuate such a charge.[16] Though the CTA ultimately fell short of its genocidal goal, it did succeed in immiserating the *hijras*, who, having been sexualized in the phantasmatic frame of the

13 I am thinking, of course, of Jacques-Alain Miller's well-known formulation of racism as a fantasized "theft of jouissance" by an other-without-lack.

14 Copjec, 213.

15 Jules Gill-Peterson, *A Short History of Trans Misogyny* (New York: Verso, 2024), 16–17.

16 Gill-Peterson, 30.

colonizers, turned to sex work once their traditional means of livelihood (dancing, singing, *badhai*) were banned.

The history of the destruction of the *hijras*' way of life, on the grounds of the threat their illegibility posed to colonial authorities—or rather, as a consequence of the colonial order's "translation" of something illegible at the level of their *gender* into an all too legible fiction of *sexual* immorality—has a great deal to teach us about the material conditions in which the unsymbolizable real of sexual difference is lived. For one thing, we should note that what enables this translation is a paranoid hermeneutic that concatenates the *fact* of homosexuality with its *impossibility*. Refusing to accept on its own terms a gender system that exceeds and, importantly, predates by many centuries the binary system of Western modernity, colonizers read the *hijras*' femininity as sign of the homosexual desire that it at once telegraphed and veiled. This interpretive, symptomatizing move, which takes as its aim the stabilization of binary gender, operates a "perverse implantation" that produces (a fictional) homosexuality in order to save binary gender from the threat *hijras* posed to it. Yet, in practically the same moment that this homosexuality-as-inner-truth is conjured into being, it too must be contained, its threat to colonial order neutralized: in the illicit sexual transactions British officials imagined for them, *hijras* were effectively charged with defrauding their normatively gendered male clientele, to whom it was simply unthinkable to impute anything like a homosexual desire, let alone a trans-amorous one. In the colonizer's calculus, gender and sexual transgression cancel one another out until the *hijras* as desiring subjects drop out of the picture altogether, leaving only their "victims": male, heterosexual, *duped*.[17]

For the purposes of the argument that I wish to advance here, I want to underscore only one of the central lessons of Gill-Peterson's study of trans misogyny for psychoanalytic thinking, namely, that the task of dividing all subjects into two mutually exclusive classes, male and female, has never once served an emancipatory end. It has in fact been one of the primary weapons wielded to commit those "crimes against otherness with which the rise of racism has begun to acquaint us," *and therefore should hold no interest whatever for*

[17] This history also has something important to teach us about the ways in which the dialectic of sexuality and gender is not something for us to "intersect" with race or not, at will and after the fact, but something that is *originally* racialized.

psychoanalysis. To the degree that clinicians and theorists busy themselves with such sorting out, the psychoanalytic clinic fails sufficiently to distinguish itself from the regimes of power into which the Michel Foucault of *La volonté du savoir* rather hastily sought to collapse it. It is well known that Juliet Mitchell laid to waste a certain line of feminist and anti-Freudian thinking by pointing out that Freud's work sets out to describe, not to recommend, the patriarchal order within which he and his hysteric analysands invented the talking cure. Could the same be said of Lacan with respect to "man" and "woman"? Of Lacanian discourse more broadly? Gill-Peterson's research on trans misogyny belongs to a wave of recent queer and trans scholarship in history, anthropology, cultural studies, and literary studies that, taken together, renders it impossible to claim in good faith that "there are only men and women" is not a prescriptive statement masquerading as a descriptive one.[18]

To be clear, none of this should be taken to suggest that psychoanalysis ought to abandon the question of sexual difference, that queer ordeal of masculinity and femininity from which not one analysand can have escaped. The point is rather that what Lacan formulates via Gottlob Frege as the two ways in which subjects may situate themselves *vis-à-vis* the universal function of castration (subjective division) and the failure of the sexual relation (to exist) describe stances, not classes. (We ought to add that Copjec's revelation of the formulae's isomorphism with Kant's antimonies implicitly ratifies this.) "These positions—to be 'not-all' or 'all' inscribed within the phallic function—are 'sexes,'" Carlson writes, "but there is nothing necessarily gendered about them; neither do they refer to biological sex. Instead, they describe stances a subject takes with respect to subjective division. According to this view, language 'sexes' us in that it demands that we take a position with respect to our own division."[19] What this means, of course, is that there is a considerable difference between claiming that the speaking being cannot *not* assume a position from which to live (with) castration, on the one hand and, on the other, that each speaking being is either a man

[18] See Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Sita Balani, *Deadly and Sick: Sexual Modernity and the Making of Race* (New York: Verso: 2023); María Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System," *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2007): 186–209.

[19] Carlson, "Transgender Subjectivity," 169.

or a woman. The former claim allows us to maintain Copjec's crucial insight into one of the major consequences of psychoanalysis for philosophy, namely, its revelation that the subject of critical philosophy is necessarily *not* neuter, while dispensing with the claim that the conceptual framework of gender inevitably seeks the restoration to the subject of this neuter status.

My uncontroversial wager, then, is that the only way to properly honor "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason" at thirty years is to allow the context in which we return to it to open it to a new reading—to determine what it yet has to teach us, now that we find ourselves on the other side of a number of intellectual, cultural, and political sequences, not to mention certain tipping points and backlashes, that expose the purely ideological character of many of the dominant uses to which Lacan's theorizations of castration and sexual difference have been put. To this end, it undertakes the modest but urgent work of attempting to wrest the emancipatory kernel of Copjec's anti-historicist defense of Lacan's account of sexual difference from, one the one hand, those points at which her argument lapses into a "cisnormative" status quo and, on the other, psychoanalysis' broader theoretical and institutional context that, mistaking its own countertransferential complicitly with the transphobia of its cultural milieu for a theoretical position, has tended to conflate what is and is not radical in Lacan. My aim, then, is not to single out Copjec's essay as an exemplary or extreme case of Lacanian theory's parochialisms (it is not). Neither is it to fault her for not having written her essay from a vantage point that postdates it by a few decades.

Instead, I wish to encourage among us some measure of distress regarding the fact that, over the course of those few decades, Lacanians have tended to use the so-called Master's late formulations of sexual difference as pretexts to seal their thinking off, on the one hand, from transformations to sex and gender unfolding in the social link and, on the other, from historical research that has firmly established the contingency and fragility of Western modernity's distribution of the sexual. Darian Leader's withering assessment of this situation is worth quoting at length:

> Phallic and non-phallic logics are endlessly contrasted and opposed, and it is a real question why the same formulae are repeated again and again with so little critical perspective. The notations for sexuation from the seminar *Encore* have generated hundreds of expositions, ranging from scholarly articles to clinical

> case reports and even entire books. Yet, the reasons why a suggestive, illuminating yet clearly inconclusive set of pseudo-mathematical formulae should prove so popular remain unexplored.
>
> To have a reality check on this, one need only [. . .] to consider the question of whether any new idea about sexuality has actually been put forward in the last 50 years in Lacanian psychoanalysis. The formulae [. . .] have had the unfortunate effect of totally blocking any further work on an area which contains many open questions [. . . and] theoretical and clinical uses of this apparent emancipation tend to be lazy and judgmental.[20]

Almost without exception, the trans or gender variant subject has been for psychoanalytic thinking and practice an occasion to forfeit the critical difference from the medical clinic that alone constitutes the therapeutic specificity of its own clinical space. In *The Desire of Psychoanalysis*, Gabriel Tupinambá observes, "by turning its attention from the visible physical body toward a specific sort of speech, psychoanalysis found that, as far as psychic suffering is concerned, *the subject who is supposed to know* [. . .] is *part of the pathology*." What therefore distinguishes this clinic from its medical antecedent is not exactly some novel element that gets added to the latter to produce the former; rather, the space of psychoanalysis is the result of "the frame of the medical clinic fall[ing] into what it is supposed to frame."[21] Corroborating this point in a searching text on the analytic encounter with queer- and trans-identified analysands, Lacanian analyst Kate Foord writes:

> If one enters the medical or the pastoral there is no hope of hearing the analysand, who is the only one to say the name from which to live [. . .]. The analyst must know how to function as the place of that missing signifier for long enough to enable the analysand to work through the defiles of the signifier to the fall of the analyst as subject supposed to know. One can see how quickly, how violently, an analysis with a queer person could run aground on an analyst's belief that, for instance, he "really is" a man, or she "really is" a woman.[22]

[20] Darian Leader, "The Gender Question from Freud to Lacan," in *Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Sexualities*, 88–89.

[21] Gabriel Tupinambá, *The Desire of Psychoanalysis* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021), 190.

[22] Foord, "Queeranalyst," 529.

If the inclusion of the frame in what it frames—in a word, the transference—figures as *sine qua non* of the psychoanalytic procedure, this procedure falls to ruin at the very moment the analyst herself, giving herself over to the countertransference, supposes to know what (gender) the analysand *really* is. From here it is a horrifyingly short distance to the conformist vision of psychoanalysis as adaptation to the social link against which Lacan staked his entire life.

2

Where do we discover the radical-emancipatory kernel of "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason" that sets Copjec's thinking against the heterosexism and cisnormativity that to this day pervade the Lacanian field? What in her argument authorizes my placing it in the service of queer and trans struggle? Counterintuitive though it may seem, I want to suggest that we take as our starting point a moment in her argument that at first glance might seem especially hostile toward trans experience. "Sex does not budge," Copjec writes, "and it is not heterosexist to say so. In fact, the opposite may be true."[23] It hardly needs saying that, given how central the plasticity of the sexed body and the signifying contingency of gender have been to the theorizations and, more importantly, the practices of trans life—given that, at the most elemental level, the very possibility of trans life is staked on the subject's capacity to effect certain kinds of relocation vis-à-vis her sexed being—Copjec's hard line regarding sex's stubbornness would seem to be a non-starter.[24] It is precisely this insistence on the imperviousness of sex, specifically to culture's "manipulations," that leads Grace Lavery to observe that "this particular strand of Lacanian thinking will not easily lend itself to an explanation of trans phenomena."[25] Granted, the terms through which she characterizes Copjec's argument in order to arrive at this observation strike me as inapposite: one can only claim, as Lavery does, that Copjec posits sex as something "ahistorical" and as "a matter of something like human essence" if one fails fully to appreciate how deadly a blow Freud's theory of the drive dealt to the very notion of human essence. Such misprisions notwithstanding, Lavery's impression of Copjec's position as one from which "trans phenomena" will

[23] Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 211.

[24] On trans and plasticity, see Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*; on contingency, see Gabriel, "Two Senses of Gender Abolition," 135–57.

[25] Grace Lavery, *Pleasure and Efficacy: Of Pen Names, Cover Versions, and Other Trans Techniques* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 53.

be difficult (if not altogether impossible) to see deserves to be taken seriously, if only because so much Lacanian ink has been spilled by authors who presume to diagnose, analyze, allegorize, or pathologize trans subjectivity from just such a position. Why wouldn't Lavery see in Copjec's argument the widespread tendency among non-trans theorists to construe their own sexed embodiment as the unbudging norm against which the movement of "transness" shows up as exceptional?

On its surface, we can observe that the pair of claims *sex does not budge* and *to claim sex does not budge is not heterosexist* is effectively homophonous with the discourse of "mainstream" transphobic ideology. There, one encounters the putative common sense that the facticity of binary sex is outside of and impervious to intervention at the level of desire or will, signifier or flesh, political transformation or historical flux—from which it follows that to say so is simply to rehearse a set of value-neutral facts. Yet the threat this homophony seems to pose dissipates in the next moment of the transphobe's "reasoning," when, in an attempt to secure its legitimacy, he must say where the immovable realities of sex are located. Conventionally, the location provided has something to do with God or science, sometimes both. Sex here is something that cannot be made to budge, something lodged in its place at the center of the subject's being, which the subject is duped to think she can *re*-place in turn.

I have raised the specter of the apparent identity of Copjec's Lacanian statements with those of the transphobe because it marks the point at which the psychoanalytic concept of sex emerges in its inassimilable difference, not only from the sex at stake in transphobic discourse, but from all other discursive fields that claim to take sex as an object. Why, according to Lacan, does sex not budge? Precisely because, in order to budge, *it would have to be something*. *That which is, budges*. By contrast, *nothing cannot budge*.

In a footnote added in 1915 to the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud sought to distinguish a properly psychoanalytic sexual difference from the muddle of "masculine" and "feminine" senses as they pertain to bodies and languages. These terms, Freud writes,

> are sometimes used in the sense of activity and passivity, sometimes in a biological, and sometimes, again, in a sociological sense. The first of these three

> meanings is the essential one and the most serviceable in psycho-analysis. When, for instance, libido was described in the text above as being 'masculine,' the word was being used in this sense, for an instinct is always active even when it has a passive aim in view. The second, or biological, meaning [. . .] is the one whose applicability can be determined most easily. Here 'masculine' and 'feminine' are characterized by the presence of spermatozoa or ova respectively and by the functions preceding from them. Activity and its concomitant phenomena [. . .] are as a rule linked with biological masculinity; but they are not necessarily so, for there are animal species in which these qualities are on the contrary assigned to the female. The third, or sociological, meaning receives its connotation from the observation of actually existing masculine and feminine individuals. Such observation shows that in human beings pure masculinity or femininity is not to be found either in a psychological or in a biological sense. Every individual on the contrary displays a mixture of the character-traits belonging to his own and to the opposite sex; and he shows a combination of activity and passivity whether or not these last character-traits tally with his biological ones.[26]

How can this moment in Freud's thinking help us grasp both the crucial distinction on which Copjec's polemic hinges and its queer- and trans-affirmative potential? One should begin by underscoring that, in cataloging the three epistemological frameworks in which "masculine" and "feminine" circulate, Freud explicitly designates both the biological and the sociological frameworks as inessential *tout court*, not merely "for psychoanalysis." Thus, if he accepts that, within the domain of biology, we can determine what "masculinity" and "femininity" index "most easily," this turns out not to be the Good News on which naturalist defenders of biological sex's putative certainty have hung their hopes. For, as he was well aware, Freud's contemporaries in the experimental life sciences were busy discovering how exceedingly narrow the remit of this signifying ease really was: all it could be said to cover were "the presence of spermatozoa or ova respectively." Beyond the bare fact of sexual reproduction, all else bears witness to an eminently plastic and fundamentally bisexual organic disposition; nothing of the organism is "purely" masculine or feminine, and anything can be made to budge.[27] Moreover, Freud mentions the link between the

[26] Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 85–86.

[27] Bisexuality will soon enough be found to hold even at the level of the gonads.

presence of spermatozoa and the "concomitant phenomena" of "activity" (by which he means virility) only to remind his reader that this association is in no way expressive of a "natural order," given that in other sexually reproductive species these same phenomena are found linked to the other sex.

The distinction between the psychoanalytic and biological concepts of sexual difference has proven easier to maintain than the one between psychoanalysis and the cultural, or what Freud refers to above as the sociological. Whereas psychiatric and cognitivist-neuroscientific attempts to reduce what psychoanalysis calls the subject to an epiphenomenal effect of the organism's neural activity are typically proffered *as disproving* the claims of psychoanalysis, Jung's "full retreat from" psychoanalysis, a direct consequence of a culturalizing rather than a biologizing impulse, was peddled *as psychoanalysis*. And when, at the conclusion of *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement*, Freud likened Jung's "modification" to Lichtenberg's knife, Freud effectively sounded a warning that culturalism figured a considerably more insidious threat-from-within to psychoanalysis than did biologism.[28]

Eighty years later, Copjec explicitly modelled her critique of Butler on Freud's polemic against "the Neo-Zurich therapy." Like Jung before them, Butler is charged with having "picked out a few cultural overtones from the symphony of life and [. . .] failed to hear the mighty and primordial melody of the drives."[29] But what does the footnote from the *Three Essays* contribute to our understanding of the cultural "use" of the terms of sexual difference? What is most striking in this passage is that, having stated that the sociological meanings of these terms derive from "the observation of actually existing masculine and feminine individuals," Freud declines to go beyond, or "get behind," what this empiricism yields. Instead, he simply repeats the obvious: In reality, there are neither purely

[28] Notwithstanding, if we read Jung closely, we understand to what extent culturalism rescues biologism, that is, restores the exhausted dualism that Freud's metapsychology so thoroughly subverted. "The pleasure and satisfaction [the baby] finds in feeding is localized in the mouth, but to interpret this pleasure as sexual is quite unjustified. Feeding is a genuine activity, satisfying in itself, and because it is a vital necessity nature has here put a premium on pleasure." Carl Gustave Jung, *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol. 5, trans. Gerhard Adler and R. F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 161.

[29] Sigmund Freud, *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement*, trans. Joan Riviere (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 74.

masculine men nor purely feminine women, but only individuals in whom qualities "belonging to his own and to the opposite sex" are mixed. It is of crucial significance to our argument that in this moment Freud effectively leaves the sociological framework intact: that there are no men entirely without "feminine" qualities and no women purified of "masculinity" is offered up as not in need of psychoanalytic clarification. It is instead a fact that, as we have already noted, Freud determines is *inessential to*—which might also be taken to mean "beyond the remit of"—the space of the psychoanalytic clinic. Alain Badiou formulates this point as follows: "infinite alterity is quite simply *what there is*. Any experience at all is the infinite deployment of infinite differences."[30] It is therefore specious for Alenka Zupančič to argue, in *What IS Sex?*, that Freud pits his elaboration of sexual difference against what she calls "the spontaneous 'liberal' understanding of sexual difference," according to which "Masculinity and Femininity [. . .] exist nowhere in reality (no person is one hundred percent masculine or feminine) [and] men and women exist only as differently portioned mixtures of the two ideal states."[31] As one can see above, Freud's remarks on "actually existing [. . .] individuals" take up nearly verbatim the "liberal" position she rehearses—not in order to refute it, but rather to emphasize that, when psychoanalysis speaks of sexual difference, it is concerned with something other than "what there is."

Nonetheless, Freud's way of restating the obvious produces its own minor estrangement effect, alerting us to a seeming contradiction at the heart of gender (which is quite clearly what is at issue in what Freud designated in terms of sociological observation). For, if its sole actuality is combinatory rather than binary—if in reality it is only ever found as a mixture of "masculine" and "feminine" qualities—this, of course, begs the question as to how or why we would be capable of identifying any such quality as "belonging" to one or the other sex in the first place. The picture that Freud observes leaves us at a loss to understand why the melee of gendered qualities as they are actually lived does not simply come apart at the seams, why the idea(l) of two proper places from which distinct sets of traits would issue does not collapse under the weight of an infinitely variegated reality. Neither does Freud swoop in to supply us with the missing psychoanalytic concept or measure that would stabilize or otherwise orient its confusion.

30 Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2001), 25.

31 Alenka Zupančič, *What* Is *Sex?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 45.

How, then, are we meant to square the fundamental (infinite) errancy of gender's senses with the tenacity of the binary terms we use to describe it? Jack Halberstam's seminal *Female Masculinity* is particularly helpful in this regard. There, Halberstam argues that there is only apparently a contradiction between the obviousness of infinite alterity and the durability of binary classification:

> In a way, gender's very flexibility and seeming fluidity is precisely what allows dimorphic gender to hold sway. Because so few people actually match any given community standards for male or female, in other words, gender can be imprecise and therefore multiply relayed through a solidly binary system. At the same time, because the definitional boundaries of male and female are so elastic, there are very few people in any given public space who are completely unreadable in terms of their gender.[32]

This passage finds Halberstam retracing Freud's steps, though in a way that reveals the dialectical truth at the heart of how gender works. For, far from being the object of a clearly drawn conflict between the multiplicity of being and a conceptual binary, the entrenched persistence of gender dimorphism would seem to result from the "harmonious" encounter of two impossibilities. On the one hand, it is strictly impossible to arrive at ideal masculinity or femininity—not because we mere mortals, in our finitude, can only ever move asymptotically toward something that only exists in an ideal form, but rather because this ideal point is precisely what is missing, or subtracted from, the field of gender. On the other hand, gender's terminological imprecision generates a signifying "space" that is claustrophobic in its capaciousness: impossible to arrive at, "masculinity" and "femininity" have also proven all but impossible to fall outside of. Halberstam thus credits binary gender's "resilience" not principally to the rigidity with which its normative scripts are enforced, but rather to the fact that it is very difficult to break what never ceases to bend. Against the widespread cliché of gender existing "on a spectrum," his illuminating account suggests something stranger: gender exists on a spectrum that is missing its extreme poles.[33] One way to resolve the impossibility of such a spectrum—and here we rejoin

[32] Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 20.

[33] One must tread carefully here: Halberstam's text accounts for why, at the time of its first publication in 1998, the proliferation of genders beyond the binary *had* not occurred, not why this *should* not or *could* not occur.

Copjec—is to see that it is a Möbius. "Rather than two species of the same genus, the sexes and the antinomies should be read as positions on a Moebius strip."[34]

3

"In fact, the opposite may be true." In Copjec's estimation, the trouble with *Gender Trouble* comes down to the fact that, in seeking to evacuate sex from its proper placelessness—as we know, to speak of the "domain" of the drive is as misleading as it is necessary—so as to relocate it to the order of the signifier, Butler opens queer thought to a difficulty that it will prove incapable of resolving on its own terms, an impasse that comes to paralyze the field's attempt to think sex. We can state this difficulty as follows. In their attempt to situate "sex" at the level of the signifier, by treating gender *in lieu of sex* (which they are right to negate as substance but wrong to negate as such), Butler subjects it to the supreme law of sense, namely, the inevitable dialectical transformation whereby any given positivity engenders its own antithesis. One divides into two, and so on.

From this a number of consequences follow, of which I shall describe only a few. First: once a certain attitude toward gender is made available as a determinate use-value to a political project—once it is tasked with precipitating a state of "subversive confusion" with the potential to "displace [. . .] naturalized and reified notions of gender that support [. . .] heterosexist power"—there is nothing stopping the capitalist system from subsuming (and thus neutralizing) this use-value as exchange-value.[35] What might have been a hypothetical at the time of *Gender Trouble*'s publication is now undeniably a widespread condition of the present moment, in which sentimental media narratives about discovering one's "true self" via gender circulate *ad nauseum* and, crucially, are increasingly impossible to disentangle from the culture industry's imperative to "build your brand." As Kay Gabriel writes, then, "*gender for capital assumes the form of an accumulation strategy*, an ideological scaffolding that sustains an unequal division of labor, contours practices of dispossession and predation, and conditions particular forms of exploitation, including and especially in the form

34 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 217.

35 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 44.

of un- and low-waged reproductive labor."[36] And yet—second consequence—it would be naïve not to notice that, even before the capitalist class begins to formally and then really subsume queerness, selling back to us our true gendered selves as so many consumer durables and services and construing the gender-queer subject as exemplary entrepreneur, the argument at stake in *Gender Trouble* already sets the stage for *its own* dialectical "subversion."[37] For what begins as an antinormative attitude, insofar as it is enlisted to a particular set of political aims, cannot but become in turn a new norm. That is to say, once the queerness of sex-as-*rupture*, as an instance of unbinding negativity, is "filled in" with and *bound to* a positive political content—no matter how morally laudable this content may be—queer has already been nullified as rupture, alchemized into material for a new idealism. "Queer," Tim Dean observes in a polemic against the state of the field of queer studies, "currently functions in the North American academy [. . .] as a progressive ego-ideal—something to aspire to—that inevitably conforms to the logic of identity. Institutionalized as an identity knowledge, *queer* has become about the ideological purity of academic egos rather than about sex. Needless to say, that purity requires extensive disciplinary policing."[38] In *Queer Forms*, which opens with a survey of current "queer, feminist, and trans* theorizing and social justice politics," Ramzi Fawaz corroborates and expands on Dean's scathing audit. Observing that much of the theory and practice in question touts gender "fluidity" as the supreme queer (read: progressive) value, Fawaz arrives at the following:

> In practice [. . .] fluidity frequently shifts from being a description of the commonly shared existential reality of mutability and change to a demand that one's personal expression of gender and sexual multiplicity be recognized as the fundamental inner truth of the self. Here, a contemporary value of fluid selfhood whose stated purpose is to resist forms of essential or fixed character paradoxically inverts into its own type of *identitarianism* [. . .] the twin constructions of

36 Kay Gabriel, "Two Senses of Gender Abolition," 140.

37 It is possible to describe the "development" of drag culture in the era of *RuPaul's Drag Race* in terms of the movement from formal subsumption to real subsumption, which transforms drag from a queer social practice into a set of culture industry goods and services.

38 Tim Dean, "No Sex Please, We're American," *American Literary History* 27, no. 3 (2015): 618. The year 2015 also saw the publication of a special issue of *Differences* on "Queer Theory Without Antinormativity," which marked an important turning point in the field's relationship to certain founding positions that we have a right to call Butlerian.

> *formlessness/fluidity* and *rigidity/identitarianism* [. . .] are often merely two sides of the same coin.[39]

To Fawaz's keen insight we wish to add two things: First, that what accounts for the flash-freezing of fluidity is precisely its being linked to a "stated purpose." Second, that a properly psychoanalytic approach to this problem—neither Freud nor Lacan are anywhere to be found in *Queer Forms*—will begin not by contesting this instrumentalizing rigidification, but rather by casting doubt on the actuality of fluidity *prior* to its "inversion." This second point requires more attention than I am able to give it here; let it suffice to say that the repetitions of the drive bear witness to a stuckness at the heart of the subject, a return to the same on which gender's abstract fluidity repeatedly snags.

Only in the last decade have queer theorists begun to come to terms with the deadlock to which Butler's early theorization of gender performativity, to the extent that it became dominant, fated the field—a deadlock, it must be said, which Copjec spotted straightaway, in its most germinal state, and argued against in the strongest possible terms. After all, *this is what concerned her*. "For it is by making it conform to the signifier," she wrote in 1994, "that you oblige sex to conform to social dictates, to take on social content. Freedom [. . .] is inconceivable within a schema such as this."[40] Of course, we may construct whatever schema we like, but sex will never oblige those who oblige it to take on the kind of signifying, "sense-ible" existence a certain kind of "good politics" requires. Indeed, as Avgi Saketopoulou writes, "the sexual, unwilled and overbrimming, pushes beyond identity categories and past the ego's binding [. . .] engaging desires that do not yield to the Orwellian censorship of good politics."[41] It is in this sense that we should understand "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason" as making an argument "in the service of" queer and trans struggle—certainly not because it elaborates a more compelling way to slot sexual and gender variance into a "good" political program, but rather because it insists on sex as definitively *not in service of*. We can translate Copjec's claim that sex "serves no other function than to limit reason" in the form of a tautology: *sex serves no other purpose than to serve no purpose*.

---

39 Ramzi Fawaz, *Queer Forms* (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 9–10.

40 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 211.

41 Avgi Saketopoulou, *Sexuality Beyond Consent: Risk, Race, Traumatophilia* (New York: New York University Press, 2023), 124.

If I seem to draw from all this a warrant to advance a "depoliticizing" conceptualization of sex, this both is and is not the case. On the one hand, I want to underscore what James Penney makes clear in *After Queer Theory*: it is impossible to deduce from any given sexual "orientation" or gender "identity" a concomitant *political* "orientation" or "identity."[42] The mere existence of fascist rodeo clowns like Milo Yiannopoulos and Caitlyn Jenner, neoliberal hardliners like RuPaul Charles, and Zionist pinkwashers like Michael Lucas renders this an indisputable fact. Yet from this it does not follow that we should imagine sexual and gender variance as having no bearing on politics. If "queerness" and "transness" are in themselves without political meaning, we know only too well how eagerly and emphatically political projects burden them with "social content," with meanings tasked with stabilizing (or, rather, mobilizing) the imaginaries that legitimate such projects.

This brings me, then, to the third and final consequence of Butler's argument I wish to address here. Within a theoretical space that interprets the iterative deconstruction of gender's normative scripts as a micropolitical strategy that denaturalizes and subverts heterosexist / patriarchal power, transsexual desires—desires "to have a certain embodied relationship to the signification of sexual difference, and to assert autonomy over that relationship"—cannot but register "as misguided, regressive, or disgusting," as an instance of "false consciousness in the extreme."[43] As Kay Gabriel points out in her excellent "Two Senses of Gender Abolition," this familiar "transphobic canard" is parroted by figures across the political spectrum who otherwise would seem to hold nothing in common: "anti-trans feminists, right-wing shills for the ruling class, and queer theory darlings"—a list to which she may as well have added "the vast majority of Lacanian psychoanalytic practitioners and theorists."[44]

[42] "The authentic socialist insight is precisely the illegitimacy of *the move from an idea of sexual identity or behaviour to a determinate political judgment*. More strongly, as psychoanalysis would concur, the very premise that sexuality lends itself to identity categories and their deconstruction is what is most essentially bourgeois about the discourse of sexual orientation." James Penney, *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), 49.

[43] Gabriel, "Two Senses of Gender Abolition," 142.

[44] Gabriel, 141.

"Two Senses" paints an unsettling picture of the current tangle of meanings that transsexuals must navigate. On the one hand, in undertaking transition—a process which obviously is only deconstructive up to a point, and only in order to facilitate a novel (re)construction—she finds herself charged with ratifying the very gendered constructions that she ought to be out in the streets fighting to dismantle.[45] On the other hand, the trans woman is susceptible to a contrary and, I think, only *seemingly* more affirmative framing, one in which her transition is read as an act of will by means of which she "actually destabilizes or denaturalizes or undoes" the "ideological force" of gender, "just like that."[46] Taking the macho autotheoretical heroics of Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie* as exemplary of this way of measuring transition's value, Gabriel observes that Preciado's position "shares with the moralism it rejects its commitment to the malleability of ideology, and the determination of ideology over the subject."[47] Note the fate of the trans subject's desire, caught as it is between these contraries. The first, obviously injurious and transphobic—which, again, is implied by a queer theoretical overestimation of the political force of deconstruction—actually *affirms* the existence of transsexual desire, but only in order to pronounce a moralizing judgment against it, a judgment that, taken to its limit, entails the annihilationist anti-trans measures currently proliferating in the United States and elsewhere at breakneck speed. The second, putatively trans-affirmative (and fervidly so)—transposing queer theory's overestimation of the political force of deconstruction—in fact negates trans desire, insofar as it subordinates the desire for transition as such to a politics within which transition is explicitly instrumentalized as a particularly lethal weapon in the "attack on normative modes of possible subjectivity."[48] Against the standard of Preciado's sometimes comically masc ideal of the trans militant laying waste to "what society wanted to make of [him]," the subject whose transition is not undertaken primarily as a means to such heroic ends may from this contrary position once again show up as "misguided, regressive, or disgusting."

45 In a similar vein, Grace Lavery writes that, "under conditions in which womanhood is associated with humiliation, this kind of desire finds itself caught in a paradox. It is a wish to be a thing that nobody would wish to be—indeed, a thing defined in some ways and by some people (including feminists) by its wish to be something else." *Pleasure and Efficacy*, 35.

46 Gabriel, "Two Senses of Gender Abolition," 142.

47 Gabriel, 142.

48 Gabriel, 142.

Of these two ways of making sense of transsexual desire, Gabriel declares that "both are moralisms, and both are equally useless."[49] Drawing on her thinking, and by way of conclusion, I want to advance the claim that *today, queer and trans liberation must take the form of a struggle against the various meanings with which they have been freighted, whether in an effort to legitimate their existence or their annihilation*. This would involve, for instance, articulating a collective demand for access to the material resources that would enable "everyone to enjoy the kinds of aesthetic contingency that capital cordons off for the wealthy," without consenting to the identitarian, narrativizing ransom that trans subjects especially have long been expected to cough up in exchange for any resources at all.[50] If there is something enduringly useful in Copjec's theorization of sexual difference for those of us who yet again find ourselves cast in the role of the fascist order's other, it is, literally, *nothing*—I mean, the *literal nothing* that sex is. That this nothing-but-the-fact-that-language-fails can be assumed in two different, incommensurate ways—that the subject *must* in fact assume castration in either one or the other of these two ways—must once and for all be disentangled from cisnormative claims against the proliferation of genders beyond man and woman and transphobic claims against trans desire as an attempt to outwit the phallus. Such claims effect a trivializing regression from the properly psychoanalytic idea of sexual difference to the *status quo ante* of the biologico-sociological sex binary, as though the former could be the long-awaited explanatory framework for the latter, which neither biology nor sociology were able to supply. Lacanian psychoanalysis must now or never confront the deadlock to which the institutionally dominant reading of sexual difference has led it. We must confront the fact that its pathologizing framing of transness, as an attempt to elude the universality of castration, in fact projects onto the trans subject this strand of psychoanalytic thinking's *own* longstanding refusal to admit them into the space of this universal. It is time to ask what fundamentals of Lacanian thinking (theory and practice) will need to change, in order that it may finally be compossible with a world in which it no longer falls to psychoanalysis to tally genders or determine the meaning of trans desire. Compossible, that is to say, with the world it already inhabits.

---

49 Gabriel, 143.

50 Gabriel, 137. See also Grace Lavery: "Trans people pretend to conform to the dominant identitarian narratives about transition in order to obtain their treatments." *Pleasure and Efficacy*, 37.

Data availability statement

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

References

Amin, Kadji. "We Are All Nonbinary: A Brief History of Accidents." *Representations* 158, no. 1 (2022): 106–19.

Badiou, Alain. *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Translated by Peter Hallward. New York: Verso, 2001.

Balani, Sita. *Deadly and Sick: Sexual Modernity and the Making of Race*. New York: Verso: 2023.

Benedicto, Bobby. "Queer Beyond Repair: Psychoanalysis and the Case for Negativity in Queer of Color Critique." *Postmodern Culture* 33, no. 2–3 (2023).

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Carlson, Shanna. "Transgender Subjectivity and the Logic of Sexual Difference." *Differences* 21, no. 2 (2010): 46–72.

Copjec, Joan. *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. New York: Verso, 2015.

Dean, Tim. "No Sex Please, We're American." *American Literary History* 27, no. 3 (2015): 614–24.

Fawaz, Ramzi. *Queer Forms*. New York: New York University Press, 2022.

Foord, Kate. "Queeranalyst." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 3–4 (2016): 518–33.

Freud, Sigmund. *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement*. Translated by Joan Riviere. New York: W. W. Norton, 1966.

———. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: Basic Books, 2000.

Gabriel, Kay. "Two Senses of Gender Abolition." In *Feminism Against Cisness*, edited by Emma Heaney, 135–57. Durham: Duke University Press, 2024.

Gherovici, Patricia and Maya Steinkoler. *Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Sexualities*. New York: Routledge, 2023.

Gill-Peterson, Jules. *Histories of the Transgender Child*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

———. *A Short History of Trans Misogyny*. New York: Verso, 2024.

Halberstam, Jack. *Female Masculinity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

Jung, Carl Gustav. *Symbols of Transformation*. Translated by Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull. Vol. 5 of *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967.

Lavery, Grace. *Pleasure and Efficacy: Of Pen Names, Cover Versions, and Other Trans Techniques*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023.

Leader, Darian. "The Gender Question from Freud to Lacan." In *Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Sexualities*, edited by Patricia Gherovici and Maya Steinkoler, 70–93. New York: Routledge, 2023.

Lugones, María. "Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System." *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2007): 186–209.

McGowan, Todd. *Universality and Identity Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.

Penney, James. *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics*. London: Pluto Press, 2014.

Saketopoulou, Avgi. *Sexuality Beyond Consent: Risk, Race, Traumatophilia*. New York: New York University Press, 2023.

Snorton, C. Riley. *Black on Both Sides*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Thomas, Calvin. "Lacanistas in the Stalls: Urinary Segregation, Transgendered Abjection, and the Queerly Ambulent Dead." In *Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Sexualities*, edited by Patricia Gherovici and Maya Steinkoler, 244–61. New York: Routledge, 2023.

Tupinambá, Gabriel. *The Desire of Psychoanalysis*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021.

Valentine, David. *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

Žižek, Slavoj. "The Real of Sexual Difference." In *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*, edited by Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink, 57–75. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002.

Zupančič, Alenka. *What* Is *Sex?* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017.

Filozofski vestnik
ISSN 0353-4510 | Volume 46 | Number 2 | 2025 | 229–40
CC BY-SA 4.0 | DOI: 10.3986/FV.46.2.10

Joan Copjec*, Nathan Gorelick**

Still Reading: An Interview with Joan Copjec

Joan Copjec, questions by Nathan Gorelick
Edited by Michelle Rada

Keywords
psychoanalysis, feminism, sexual difference, the uncanny, Abbas Kiarostami

Abstract
The following is a retrospective interview with Joan Copjec on her formative 1994 book, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. The interviewer asks Copjec to reflect on the political and academic context surrounding the book's initial publication, her personal inspiration for writing it as she did, and its enduring relevance after thirty years. Copjec also situates *Read My Desire* with respect to her recent work concerning the films of Abbas Kiarostami; the changed cultural and intellectual status of psychoanalysis today; the uncanny dimension of American electoral politics and the unthought fantasies that structure it; and the history of the relation between psychoanalysis and Islam. The interview concludes with some indication of where Copjec's research, teaching, and writing are headed now and into the future.

Branje (ni) zastalo: intervju z Joan Copjec

Spraševal Nathan Gorelick
Uredila Michelle Rada

Ključne besede
psihoanaliza, feminizem, spolna razlika, grozljivo, Abbas Kiarostami

Povzetek
Pričujoči intervju z Joan Copjec je retrospektiva njene formativne knjige *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. Spraševalec je Copjec povabil k refleksiji političnega in

* Brown University, Providence, RI, USA
Joan_Copjec@brown.edu
** Barnard College, New York, NY, USA
ngorelick@barnard.edu | https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7536-6443

akademskega konteksta, v katerem je knjiga prvič izšla, njenega osebnega navdiha za to, da je knjigo napisala na takšen način, ter njene relevantnosti, ki traja že trideset let. Copjec knjigo *Read My Desire* umesti tudi v razmerje z njenim novejšim delom, ki zadeva filme Abbasa Kiarostamija; s spremenjenim kulturnim in intelektualnim statusom psihoanalize; z grozljivo razsežnostjo ameriške volilne politike ter nemišljenimi fantazmami, ki jo strukturirajo; ter z razmerjem med psihoanalizo in islamom. Intervju se zaključi z nekaterimi namigi, kam se Copjecino raziskovanje, poučevanje in pisanje usmerjajo sedaj in v prihodnosti.

∞

Nathan Gorelick: Thirty years ago, you took the historicists to task for failing or refusing to consider the work of the negative in cultural formations. Foucault is your central reference point, but you address your critique, from different angles, to later theorists, like Ian Hacking and Judith Butler. What compelled you to address your critique in this direction? What were your original inspirations? And who today do you see carrying on your indictment of historicism's allergy to the negative?

Joan Copjec: To put it bluntly, I was flummoxed by the reemergence of historicism in the mid-1980s; where it came from I hadn't a clue. My consternation, admittedly naïve, derived from an earlier naivety or simple indifference to feminism. I thought women should be paid properly and make their own decisions, but never considered these practical concerns, voiced mainly by feminists, as interesting. It was not until I began my study of film theory at the Slade School in London that I became interested—with the help of *Screen* and *Screen* readers' meetings, *m/f*, the Other Cinema, as well as conferences and festivals organized outside the university system—in questions of sexuality and sexual difference as they were formulated by Freud and Lacan, and appropriated by film theory.

This fresh, break-way approach to film and Marxist theory struck me as rigorous, convincing, and at the end of the day indispensable for thought in general. Yes, this work foregrounded the need for a concept of the negative and also required a rethinking of temporality, both of which were gapingly absent from the work of historicists. More: this novel theoretical approach produced readings of

films that justified our enchantment with them. Rather than tedious reductions to the linear unfolding of narratives, one damn thing after another, these often brilliant readings drew attention to lapses, stutterings, off-screen menaces, and perplexing stains, complexities—in brief, events that stopped audiences short, made them think. I remember watching *Young Mr. Lincoln* and suddenly gasping in unison with my classmates, not because someone had been shot or a secret revealed, but because we detected an eye-line mismatch. We had come to understand how morality might, indeed, lie in tracking shots and birds might rend the very image in which they appeared. It was through the psychoanalytic theory of sexuality that we learned to see more, to see clearly what was functionally unavailable without it. In the absence of the latter, the questions posed would not even have been formulated, let alone clarified.

Given my enthusiasm, I could only be startled to witness the theory of sexual difference being cast out the window, by figures such as Shulamith Firestone, who regarded "the end goal of the feminist revolution [as] not just the elimination of male privilege, *but of the sex distinction itself*."[1] Or Teresa de Lauretis, who insisted that "a feminist theory of gender [. . .] points to a conception of the subject as multiple rather than divided."[2] I would have thought the opposite: How can there be a multiple without division? Or Judith Butler's reversion to the sociological concept of *gender*, which struck me at the time as a tacit withdrawal from the messier concepts of sexuality and sexual difference. As if—as Ian Hacking dismissively put it—one could "make up people." Things do not work this way, for the subject does not come into the world unilaterally, from the outside only.

I was relieved to have my gaping mouth, full of surprise, shut by non-naïve observers—Lacan, for example, who stated more than once that the first thing capitalism does is get rid of sex; or Leo Bersani, whose stunning statement, written in the midst of the AIDS crisis, "There is a big secret about sex: most people don't like it." Bersani did not hold back from tainting even Foucault, whose work he greatly admired, with the prissiness of this very weak "like."

---

1 Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam, 1970), 11.

2 Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays in Theory, Film and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), x.

The psychoanalytic theorization of sexuality was left behind by some queer theorists in favor of promoting a different lifestyle. The "allergy of the negative" you mention is, in my estimation, an allergy to the real of *jouissance*. I was pleased to learn recently that Kirsten Hyldgaard, a Danish Lacanian theorist, will soon publish a book in the Palgrave Lacan series on precisely this allergy, which characterizes the relation between education and sexuality, a relation Lacan himself took up in *Seminar XVII* through his formulas of the four discourses.[3]

Gorelick: It will not be controversial to say that elements of *Read My Desire* have proved remarkably prescient. Your take on the Teflon President, for instance, immediately comes to mind. Does the book predict the future? Or does its currency today speak rather to the persistence of certain patterns and cultural susceptibilities that are integral to the structure of our political and social realities—and, if so, what are some of them? Amid the repetition, how can history still surprise us?

Copjec: Well, I suppose it stands to reason that Reagan's Teflon-clad immunity could not be expected to protect him from a Lacanian critique. But, in answer to your question, I did not foresee nor can I explain Trump's second coming! I am sure some cogent analyses of this event have been and will be written, but I have resisted reading them or offering any insights of my own. This is in part because I realize that some careful rethinking of psychoanalytic concepts would have to be undertaken to avoid glib applications of already existing formulas. But it occurred to me lately that this disinterest or preference to leave what is unthinkable unthinkable, is itself a problem. It is nothing less than an agnostic reflex and it needs to be paralyzed.

Let me explain. Shortly before the [2024] Presidential Election, I participated in a conversation about an Iranian film, Dariush Merjui's *The Cow*. Made in 1969, the film was permitted to be screened only on the condition that a caption was placed at the beginning of the film stating that the events depicted took place forty-years earlier, that is, *before* the Reza Shah's reforms were put in place, ostensibly to lift the nation out of poverty. This officially imposed anachronism

3 Kirsten Hyldgaard, *Sex Education and Other Pedagogical Impossibilities: Lacanian Psychoanalysis and Sexuality Education* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2026).

had the unfortunate effect of blinding audiences to the anachronism the film marvelously produced. For, it encouraged audiences to read the film in the very manner the Shah was attempting to thwart, that is: allegorically, as a depiction of the poverty the authoritarian regime's policies allowed to fester. A question hangs palpably over the film: in what time are these events taking place? The film's out-of-joint temporality defines its very appeal. This is not, however, the result of the Shah's mandated fiction. The film is anachronic on its own terms, for it belongs to the category Freud theorizes as the uncanny.

This is not the occasion to offer a full analysis of the film. I want merely to suggest that *The Cow* illustrates the way in which the uncanny deflects the agnostic, I-do-not-want-to-know-anything-about-it reflex. One must not fail to see that the utter poverty of the film's backward village stems not from government policies so much as from this very reflex. Among the objects in the village we find, for example, abandoned U.S. military equipment, which the villagers carry around as sepulchers to perform their ancient rituals. A kind of anachronism is exposed here, inasmuch as the equipment and the villagers inhabit different times, even though they do not seem to be aware of this. In order to understand the film, we must distinguish the villagers' temporal disjoint from the one that defines the strategy of the film itself. The events concern the death of a cow that dies while its owner is away. The villagers, afraid to give its owner the bad news, decide to bury the cow so as not to have to confront the loss or its effect on the owner. As the cow is lowered into the hole that was dug for its burial, a slow-motion, extreme close-up of its face seems briefly to animate it. How to describe this shot as anything other than uncanny? Indeed, in his essay on the subject, Freud reports that "the idea of being buried alive" is commonly regarded to epitomize the uncanny fantasy. He then goes on to assert that this fantasy has its roots in an earlier fantasy. This other, root-fantasy is characterized, he notes, by "a certain lasciviousness, the phantasy [. . .] of intra-uterine existence."[4]

When I discussed this film days before Trump's election, I noted this shot and its relation to the intra-uterine fantasy, but understood it incorrectly, as an image of "stuckness," of being stuck in the birth canal, unable to go forward, to emerge into the world. It seemed to me that this was the position in which we

4 Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 17:244.

find the villagers. *The Cow* is a film about infertility, the failure of the people in this isolated village to move forward, to give birth to the new. Out of step with the world, these villagers remain unequipped to alter their circumstances. It makes sense that the only step they can imagine taking to relieve their discontent is to bury the cow, the only fertile creature in this arid land. The uncanny shot of the cow, however, is created by a device of cinema, one that permits the audience to visualize something they cannot. They regard their problems as the fault of distant enemies, whom they believe are real, though they are most likely not. And this, too, disqualifies their experience from the category of the uncanny. For, as Freud keeps repeating throughout his essay, the uncanny requires our having surmounted certain beliefs—in ghosts, say, or telepathy—but without expelling them absolutely. The uncanny effect emerges precisely as an effacement of the distinction between imagination and reality.[5]

In her astute reading of Freud's essay, Hélène Cixous slightly rewords Freud's point, suggesting that the uncanny can be characterized as "the non-scientific [that is to say, the fictive or literary] clothed with the dignity of the scientific."[6] The fictional, in other words, performs a scientific service. Freud draws his definition of the uncanny partly from the work of E. Jentsch. But while the latter regarded the uncanny relation between the scientific and the fictive as indicative of uncertainty, Freud is adamant that the uncanny is accompanied by a sense of certainty. At the close of the essay his aim becomes clear: Freud is insisting on the fecundity of the fictive, its ability to open doors to thought, foreclosed to it in its merely rational form. Now is perhaps the time to mention that the screenplay for *The Cow* was written by Gholamhossein Sa'aedi, who studied psychoanalysis and had a clinic in Tehran. I assume he was familiar with Freud's essay, but the image speaks for itself.

It has often been observed that the opening of the essay on the uncanny alludes to Kant's theory of the sublime. It is also well-known that Kant insisted that we were unable to know things-in-themselves. Might it be said that the essay on the uncanny is Freud's attempt to direct modern thought away from seeking

---

5 Freud, 17:244.

6 Hélène Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The 'Uncanny')," trans. Robert Denommé, rev. Eric Prenowitz, in *Volleys of Humanity: Essays 1972–2009*, ed. Eric Prenowitz (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 19.

after what already is and toward the unleashing of what is not yet? The function of the uncanny would thus be a means of stunning or paralyzing the agnostic reflex. One last mark to conclude with our filmic example, *The Cow*: rather than an overlap of life and death, would it not be more accurate to describe this uncanny close-up as an overlap or emergence of the born out of the unborn?

Gorelick: Lacan often remarked that psychoanalysis was destined to disappear, not in spite but because of its success. At the moment, however, the Freudian field is enjoying something of a renaissance. Young people seem to have caught on that we've been sold a caricature of psychoanalysis, that alternatives refuse or fail to tread the field of the unconscious, and that the complexities of psychoanalytic treatment and thought still have much to offer—especially in these times of mass deprivation, alienation, and the contraction of life and psyche to utilitarian ends. Is this a fluke or a fad? Is psychoanalysis merely back in fashion? What do you see as the future for psychoanalytic critique?

Copjec: Georges Canguilhem coined a phrase that might be useful here. He wrote about "the vitality of vitalism," by which he meant to draw attention to the fact that some form of vitalism (whatever that might mean, beyond, as Bergson himself notes, to "attach a label to our ignorance") has kept appearing throughout history, each time in response to whatever new form of mechanism had taken over from the last. The same might be said of the recent history of psychoanalysis. It seems to have been gifted with a vitality that allows it to return, renewed and willing to confront each new backlash against it. I thought I detected a decline in the enthusiasm for psychoanalytic forms of argumentation a few years ago. But at the moment we are witnessing a renewed interest in Fanon and his clinic, a wider interest in defining the Black subject, as well as a flourishing of trans-sexuality—all of which has had the effect of enflaming renewed interest in psychoanalysis. To be sure, this interest is not without harsh criticisms of certain psychoanalytic positions, but it is evident that they are meant to prod the only discourse that might be able to offer some enlightenment into paying attention to their concerns.

Gorelick: When you published *Read My Desire*, you were the Director of the Center for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Culture at SUNY Buffalo. How has your writing been influenced, informed, or formed by your work with your students? How has that changed or continued since your move to Brown?

Copjec: I was recruited by the English Department at Buffalo to take over the Directorship of the Center for Study of Psychology and English Literature. The Center, founded in the mid-70s, was the first center of its kind in the U.S. Historically and effectively significant. I was approached because it had begun to run out of steam. Only a few of its founders remained and the English Department had taken to wondering why it had agreed to support it financially (even at the minimal level to which it had agreed) in the first place. It did not take me long to change its name to the Center for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Culture, nor to realize that I had no chance of keeping interest and money flowing into it if I did not make its importance known to a much wider world—and quickly! So, I decided to found a journal that would cost next to nothing because the graduate students would provide all the labor—unpaid, of course, other than by the experience, knowledge, and recognition they would gain from their intellectual endeavors. So, *Umbr(a)* was born and, as if in a fairytale, became a success not only in the U.S. It was read and its essays translated in various countries. The yearly issues were not numbered, each was named "One." Wit and humor were required in meetings and in the issues to salt the sophistication of theory. I could go on to recount the impact that this often hilarious and always intense intellectual adventure had on me and on the graduates who participated in it, but will leave this to another day.

I came to Brown under similar but less dramatic circumstances. Modern Culture and Media, formerly the Semiotics program, had lost several of the professors who understood and taught film and other media forms in the way I, too, understood it, although my work on film had in the interim lagged behind my work on psychoanalysis. My strategy in this case was not to attempt to retreat back into a cinematic cell but to design seminars on psychoanalysis that would serve as a magnet to draw students from other departments to my MCM seminars. I learned at Buffalo how difficult it is to provide students with an adequate background to grasp the importance of the science Freud invented. Seminars on psychoanalysis plus the experience of producing *Umbr(a)* would not have been enough by themselves to raise the graduates to the level they were able to attain. Students had to have a firm knowledge of the philosophical backgrounds in which Freud and Lacan intervened. Fortunately for me, the Comparative Literature department at Buffalo is very good and I was able to count on the fact that students in my seminars were well acquainted with Kant and Hegel, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Deleuze among other pertinent philosophers.

A similar situation exists at Brown. Students from other departments—Comparative Literature and German Studies, among others—can be counted on to take seminars that address the issues that interest them from the perspective of psychoanalysis. This past semester, a German Studies colleague offered a seminar on Heidegger and Lacan that ended with a symposium to which she and I invited experts from both sides. I felt strongly that significant work was produced out of this collaboration.

Gorelick: Some may see your turn to Islam, particularly through its refraction in the films of Abbas Kiarostami, as a drastic departure from the questions you raise in *Read My Desire*. Do you see it this way? What are the continuities or continuations? Has this work changed your mind about any of your earlier formulations?

Copjec: Nate, you know as well as anyone what a strange departure the decision to devote an issue of *Umbr(a)* to "Islam" (as simple as that!) seemed to be.[7] First, because the journal was founded on the premise that the students and I—and other professors who were later hired and joined the board—were all on the same level. There was no editorial hierarchy. Decisions, including the focus of each issue, were made together. This was the only time I played the "professor" card, surprising everyone by announcing the theme of the next year's issue at a meeting. The announcement was met with legitimate consternation. What do any of us know about this topic? How will we find authors to write about it from a psychoanalytic perspective? We do not have enough time to get such a complex issue out by next year! I admitted earlier that I can be naïve and that this is a weakness. But sometimes there is a stubbornness to this naivety that I count on to blind myself to obstacles. I also knew that among the graduates there were excellent translators, editors, and researchers and that they would donate their skills to get the issue done. And so we did.

The reason I proposed the topic of Islam is because I had just seen two films, Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us* and Mehrjui's *The Cow*, both of which struck me as so extraordinary that I barely knew what I was looking at. Now, this sense of not knowing what one is seeing is often aroused by great works

7 Copjec here is referencing the fact that Nathan Gorelick was Managing Editor of the issue in question.

of art even if they come from a culture with which one is familiar. In this case, however, I knew that part of my difficulty had to do with the fact that I knew nothing of Iranian culture or the Islamic world, even though the official wisdom in the U.S. was that it was evil and wished us harm. And yet here were these extraordinary films. I learned quickly that the modesty system in place in Islamic society dictated what could be shown on screen and what could not, that this system which effected relations between men and women also affected the art this culture produced. My deplorable naivety met its match in its stubborn form: I insisted on knowing as much as I could as quickly as I could about all of this.

What our work on the *Umbr(a)* issue and my subsequent researches showed was that one actually could "do psychoanalysis in Tehran." Gohar Homayounpour, an analyst who practices in Tehran, sits on the Board of the Freud Museum in Vienna, and gave her first book the title, *Doing Psychoanalysis in Tehran*, was in fact a friend of Kiarostami, who also wrote the book's foreword. The main sources that led me to the conviction that Islamic philosophy and psychoanalysis are partially readable through each other are the works of Henry Corbin and Christian Jambet. Through their writings I was able not only to observe similarities between the two discourses but sometimes to rethink the way I understood some Lacanian concept in light of Islamic philosophical arguments. *Seminar XX*, for example, contains, unmistakably, Islamic phrases and arguments. One must be wary, as Lacan puts it somewhere, of "false friends," but one finds friends that are truly enlightening.

Gorelick: This may be from a footnote in "The Direction of the Treatment," which appears in French as *faux amis*. Bruce Fink translates this as "false cognates." Is this worth mentioning here?

This small and unavoidable glitch in translation is interesting in light of the questions you raise about cross- or inter-cultural legibility, since with Islam and psychoanalysis we are dealing in no small part with discrepant symbolic orders. For instance, moving from one monotheism to another, it is impossible not to notice the radically different meanings (plural) of "God" in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, and the ontological differences they present. Even "metaphysics" is ill-fitted to the Islamic conception of Allah, as *meta-* and *-physis* already presuppose a division between immanence and transcendence that

in Islam does not obtain, or certainly not in the same way. Could there be any more false friends (more false cognates) than those signifiers called God?

Copjec: I do not think that "cognates" and "friends" are false friends and understood why Bruce Fink translated the phrase as he did, colloquially; the phrase always stuck with me. Regarding the "false friends that may or may not exist" between Islam and the other two monotheisms . . . this is of course an important concern I had the entire time I was writing my *Cloud* book (and I always had Lacan's line / Fink's translation literally in mind). How could one not? I knew what I was getting into when I began the project. I dealt with some of the differences in "The Imaginal World and Modern Oblivion" and "From the Cloud to the Resistance" chapters. Islam, the last of the three monotheisms, borrowed ideas from the other two, and rejected others. The "question of the One" has a very long history and was not settled in the same way by all.

Gorelick: What interests you now?

Copjec: My current project is focused on the work of Georges Canguilhem. In the very early days of my study of film theory, Marxism, and psychoanalysis, I read Dominique Lecourt's book, *Marxism and Epistemology: Bachelard, Canguilhem and Foucault*. As strange as it may seem, and despite the fact that Lecourt is rather critical in this book of Canguilhem's stance, I have always since then seen myself as grounded in the Bachelardian-Canguilhemian tradition. Although it is Foucault's introduction to *The Normal and the Pathological* that drew many readers to Canguilhem's work, I observed more of a tension than a correspondence between Foucault and Canguilhem. The latter, a philosopher who turned to the science of biology as his "test case," rather than mathematics—as did his mentor, Gaston Bachelard, and one of his students, Alain Badiou—coined the now-famous phrase, "life is what errs." The question I am pursuing regards the relation between technology and life, which I was fated to take up having been introduced to the concepts of the cinematic apparatus and the psychic apparatus simultaneously. The title of my Ph.D. dissertation was "Apparatus and Umbra."

In the last few years, I offered a variety of seminars that dealt with the concept of the apparatus and included in each one or two essays by Canguilhem. It was his work that seemed each time to excite the imagination of the students. This

fall [2024] I devoted an entire seminar to his work. We began with Canguilhem's seemingly exhaustive study of the concept of the reflex, one of his most celebrated works. It was from this point that we were able to locate ramifying connections between Canguilhem's biology and Freud's "biology of the mind." To be continued . . .

Data availability statement

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

References

Cixous, Hélène. "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The 'Uncanny')." Translated by Robert Denommé, revised by Eric Prenowitz. In *Volleys of Humanity: Essays 1972–2009*, edited by Eric Prenowitz, 15–40. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011.

Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: Bantam, 1970.

Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny (1919)." In *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works (1917–1919)*, edited by James Strachey, 217–56. Vol. 17 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Horgarth Press, 1974.

Hyldgaard, Kirsten. *Sex Education and Other Pedagogical Impossibilities: Lacanian Psychoanalysis and Sexuality Education*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2026.

Lauretis, Teresa de. *Technologies of Gender: Essays in Theory, Film and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

Information for Contributors

We accept manuscripts in Slovenian, English, French, and German. Submissions must be original works that have not been previously published and are not under consideration for publication elsewhere.

Authors should provide the manuscript in Microsoft Word format (.doc or .docx), preferably in *Times New Roman* font, with 1.5 line spacing. Each manuscript should include an abstract summarising the main points in no more than 150 words, in both the language of the manuscript and in English, accompanied by up to seven keywords in both languages. Authors are required to provide their institutional affiliation(s), email address, and ORCID number (if available).

Manuscripts should be no more than 10,000 words, including the notes and the references list. Clearly marked subheadings should be used to section the manuscripts; they should not be numbered. Titles of subsections, if used, should be italicised. The manuscript title and subheadings should follow headline-style capitalisation. Use single line spacing to denote paragraph breaks instead of indenting. Quotations exceeding four lines should be separated from the main text with paragraph breaks before and after and should be fully indented on the left margin. The titles of books, journals, and foreign words (e.g. *a priori*, *epoché*, *élan vital*, *Umwelt*, etc.) should be italicised.

Citation style
Manuscripts should follow the Chicago Manual of Style, 17th edition, specifically the Notes and Bibliography style. For guidance, refer to the Chicago Manual of Style (https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html). When citing journal articles, include a DOI number, if available.

Reference list
Bibliographic details should be provided in a separate alphabetical list at the end of the manuscript. The reference list should contain only entries that have been explicitly cited in the notes of the manuscript.

Pictures
Do not embed images within the manuscript. Instead, indicate where they should be placed in the final version. Images should be provided separately in .jpg format, with a resolution of at least 300 dpi.

British/American spelling and the Oxford (or serial) comma
British or American spelling is acceptable, but the text must be internally consistent. Furthermore, consistent use of the S or Z form of words such as organise/organize, summarize/summarise, etc., is required. A comma follows e.g. and i.e. in American English, but not in British English. Furthermore, the journal uses the Oxford (or serial) comma. The Oxford comma is used after the penultimate item in a list of three or more items, i.e. before “and” or “or” (e.g. an Italian painter, sculptor, and architect).

Other
Articles will undergo external peer review. By submitting a manuscript, authors agree to the publication terms listed under “Copyright Notice” on the journal’s website. Proofs will be forwarded to authors for review. Please correct and return them to the Editor promptly. Alterations other than corrections of typographical errors will not be accepted.

Obvestilo avtorjem

Sprejemamo prispevke v slovenskem, angleškem, francoskem ali nemškem jeziku. Uredništvo ne sprejema prispevkov, ki so bili že objavljeni ali istočasno poslani v objavo drugam.

Prispevki naj bodo pisani v programu Microsoft Word (.doc ali .docx format) v pisavi *Times New Roman* in s presledki 1,5 vrstice. Priložen naj bo izvleček (v slovenščini in angleščini), ki povzema glavne poudarke v dolžini do 150 besed in do sedem ključnih besed (v slovenščini in angleščini). Avtorji naj priložijo svojo institucionalno afiliacijo, e-naslov in ORCID številko.

Prispevki naj ne presegajo obsega dveh avtorskih pol (tj. 60.000 znakov s presledki) vključno z vsemi opombami in seznamom literature. Zaželeno je, da so prispevki razdeljeni na razdelke in opremljeni z mednaslovi, ki naj ne bodo oštevilčeni. Za označitev novega odstavka se ne uporabi zamik prve vrstice, temveč se uporabi prazna vrstica. V besedilu se dosledno uporabljajo dvojni narekovaji (tj. »«), npr. pri navajanju naslovov člankov, citiranih besedah ali stavkih, tehničnih in posebnih izrazih, razen pri citatih znotraj citatov. Citate, daljše od štirih vrstic, se loči od glavnega teksta z zamikom celotnega citata. Pred citatom in po citatu se pusti prazna vrstica. Naslove knjig, periodike in tuje besede (npr. *a priori*, *epoché*, *élan vital*, *Umwelt*, itn.) je treba pisati ležeče.

Citiranje
Citiranje v prispevku mora biti urejeno v skladu s Chicago Manual of Style, 17. izdaja, Notes and Bibliography style, ob upoštevanju vseh slovenskih slovničnih pravil. Za vodilo glej Chicago Manual of Style (https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html). Pri navajanju člankov naj bo, če je mogoče, dodana DOI številka.

Navajanje literature na koncu prispevkov
Na koncu prispevka je navedena celotna literatura, urejena po abecednem redu. Seznam lahko vključuje le literaturo, ki je navedena v sprotni opombi.

Slike
Slike se ne vstavljajo v prispevek, označi se samo približna mesta, kjer bodo objavljene. Slike se pošilja v jpg formatu, ločljivost najmanj 300 dpi.

Ostale informacije avtorjem
Prispevki bodo poslani v recenzijo. Avtorji se strinjajo s pogoji objave, navedenimi v *Obvestilu o avtorskih pravicah*, ki je objavljeno na spletni strani revije. Avtorjem bodo poslane korekture. Pregledane korekture je treba vrniti v uredništvo v najkrajšem možnem času. Upoštevani bodo samo popravki tipografskih napak.

Filozofski vestnik

ISSN 0353-4510

Programska zasnova

Filozofski vestnik (ISSN 0353-4510) je glasilo Filozofskega inštituta Znanstvenoraziskovalnega centra Slovenske akademije znanosti in umetnosti. Filozofski vestnik je znanstveni časopis za filozofijo z interdisciplinarno in mednarodno usmeritvijo in je forum za diskusijo o širokem spektru vprašanj s področja sodobne filozofije, etike, estetike, poli tične, pravne filozofije, filozofije jezika, filozofije zgodovine in zgodovine politične misli, epistemologije in filozofije znanosti, zgodovine filozofije in teoretske psihoanalize. Odprt je za različne filozofske usmeritve, stile in šole ter spodbuja teoretski dialog med njimi.

Letno izidejo tri številke. Druga številka je posvečena temi, ki jo določi uredniški odbor. Prispevki so objavljeni v angleškem, francoskem in nemškem jeziku s povzetki v angleškem in slovenskem jeziku.

Filozofski vestnik je vključen v: Arts & Humanities Citation Index, Current Contents / Arts & Humanities, EBSCO, IBZ (Internationale Bibliographie der Zeitschriften), The Philosopher's Index, Répertoire bibliographique de philosophie, Scopus in Sociological Abstracts.

Izid revije je finančno podprla Javna agencija za znanstvenoraziskovalno in inovacijsko dejavnost Republike Slovenije. Filozofski vestnik je ustanovila Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti.

Aims and Scope

Filozofski vestnik (ISSN 0353-4510) is edited and published by the Institute of Philosophy of the Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts. Filozofski vestnik is a philosophy journal with an interdisciplinary character. It provides a forum for discussion on a wide range of issues in contemporary political philosophy, history of philosophy, history of political thought, philosophy of law, social philosophy, epistemology, philosophy of science, cultural critique, ethics, and aesthetics. The journal is open to different philosophical orientations, styles and schools, and welcomes theoretical dialogue among them.

Three issues of the journal are published annually. The second issue is a special issue that brings together articles by experts on a topic chosen by the Editorial Board. Articles are published in English, French, or German, with abstracts in Slovenian and English.

Filozofski vestnik is indexed/abstracted in the Arts & Humanities Citation Index; Current Contents / Arts & Humanities; EBSCO; IBZ (Internationale Bibliographie der Zeitschriften); The Philosopher's Index; Répertoire bibliographique de philosophie; Scopus; and Sociological Abstracts.

Filozofski vestnik is published with the support of the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency. Filozofski vestnik was founded by the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

9 770353 451019

Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*, 30 Years On